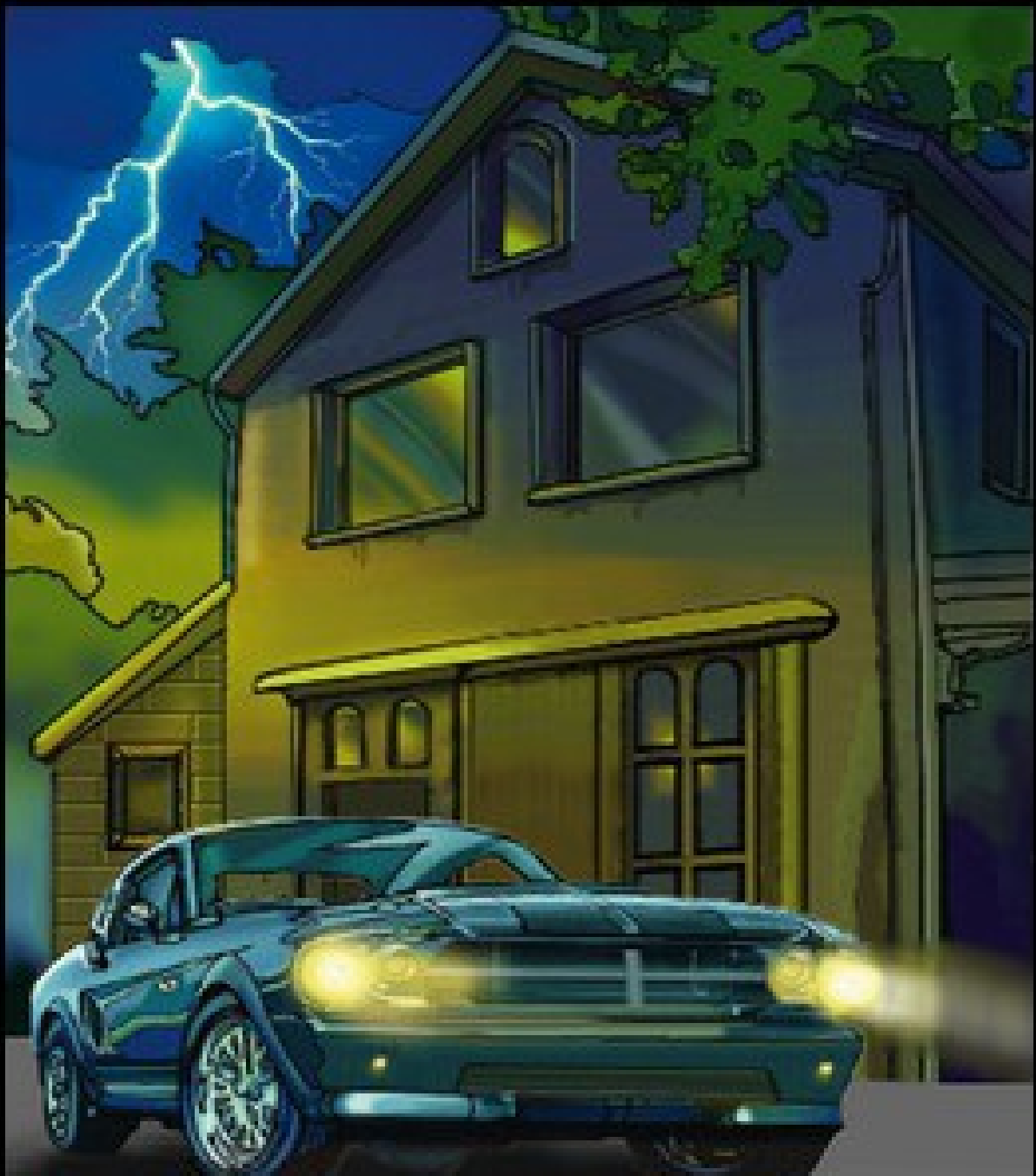


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE THREE PARALLEL CASES

CASE III: THE WALKING STATUE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
THREE PARALLEL CASES**

Case III: The Walking Statue

Three possible cases are available to The Three Investigators on the same days... in parallel! But which one will occur? Can an inconspicuous toppling of a drinking glass determine the course of events? In this particular case, which may or may not happen, Pete meets a girl who lives with her aunt in a mansion where eerie thumping noises are heard. Together with Jupiter and Bob, he searches the mansion for clues, only to be confronted by a statue that walks! Very soon, they suspect that there is something else in the mansion.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Three Parallel Cases
Case III: The Walking Statue

*Original German texts by
Ganymed [Fan Story],
Ivar Leon Menger & John Beckmann*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

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(The Three ??? and the Walking Statue)

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Ganymed
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and

Die drei ??? und der dreiTag
[P] Fremder Freund
(The Three ??? and the Three-Day)
([P] Stranger Friend)

by
Ivar Leon Menger & John Beckmann
(2011)

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Silvia Christoph

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1. A Drinking Glass Topples

“Are you done with the report?” Jupiter sipped impatiently on his glass of Coke.

The Three Investigators sat in Jill’s Place—a cosy western-style fast food restaurant in downtown Rocky Beach. The rays of the afternoon sun fell through the huge window front, which stretched almost around the entire building.

Bob replied with an affirmative ‘hmm’ but did not allow himself to be distracted. The investigator responsible for records and research was about to finish jotting down the notes of their just-concluded case. Without a computer, he did so by hand in his notebook.

“Now don’t rush him,” Pete said. “After all, this was one of the most difficult cases in the history of our agency.”

“Yes, but I’m hungry!” Jupiter demonstratively stroked his fat belly. Once again he glanced longingly at the neighbouring tables, from which the seductive smell of the hamburgers that Jill’s Place was famous for drifted across the room.

Jupiter’s mouth watered at the thought of all these grilled delicacies. All the hamburger creations in Jill’s Place were named after famous characters from western movies—the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese; the Cogburn Chicken with hearty mayonnaise; the Double Chisum with extra beef, bacon and fried onions; the hellishly hot Django Chilli; and of course, Jill’s Dream with the famous McBain special sauce...

“Don’t forget... we’re also here to celebrate the huge bargain I got at the garage sale earlier,” Jupe added.

Pete grinned. “That film projector really got to you, Jupe. Anyway, Mrs Sullivan was probably glad to get rid of it.”

The face of the First Investigator brightened up suddenly. “A genuine Novalux T-800,” he said ecstatically. “Over thirty years old and still looks as good as new. And for just five dollars—that’s what I call luck!”

“What do you want to do with such an old projector?” Pete asked.

“These projectors are pretty rare and worth quite a bit,” Jupe replied. “If it’s working, I just need to clean it up; if not, I’ll try to fix it. Anyway, I hope to sell it for a lot more than I paid for—”

“—Which will be handed over to the police on Friday. Report complete!” Bob put his pencil down, beaming. “So, fellas, that concludes our case for the day.”

Shaking his head, Pete skimmed the report. “Boy, that was really crazy. The names alone confuse me.”

“Well, it’s over now,” Jupiter replied succinctly. He was obviously keen to move on to the next item on the agenda as quickly as possible. “And now that the report is done, we can finally turn to the menu!”

Bob grabbed hold of the menu, which was in the shape of an oversized sheriff’s star, and leafed through it.

“Hey! I want to order first,” Jupe exclaimed.

“No way,” Bob argued. “You two had all the time to look at the menu when I was finishing up the report, but you didn’t... so I’m ordering first.”

“How come there is only one copy of the menu at our table?” Pete wondered.

At that moment, the mobile phone in Jupiter's pocket rang. "Why is somebody calling now when I'm so hungry..." He sighed and hurriedly rummaged through his pocket for his mobile phone.

"I'll go get another copy of the menu..." Pete turned looking. "Ah, there's one over there on that vacant table." The Second Investigator hastily got up and bumped against the table causing Jupiter's almost-full glass to sway dangerously.

"Aaaargh!" In a spontaneous response, Bob reached forward, but it was too late. With a muffled clink, the glass fell over and its dark brown contents splashed over the table and onto Pete's pants. The Second Investigator uttered a short cry but it was already too late.

As a reflex action, Jupiter backed up and jumped away from the table. In the process, the phone dropped from his fingers, clattered on the floor, and slipped away.

Frantically, Bob plucked one paper napkin after another from the dispenser in an attempt to contain the drink from spilling further, while Pete stood up and also took some napkins to wipe the drink off his pants.

Jupiter looked all around the floor for the phone as the ringtone echoed loudly through the restaurant. Some of the other guests had turned to look at the three of them. An elderly man at the next table shook his head uncomprehendingly.

Pete pointed to his wet pants. "Aaaargh! It looks like I've wet my pants!" The drink had dyed the light blue fabric almost black. "What a bummer! You can't get Coke out easily, can you?" He continued to dry his pants with paper napkins.

"You shouldn't rub so much," Bob advised him. "You gotta dab!"

"I'm dabbling," replied the Second Investigator, annoyed.

Jupiter went down searching for his mobile phone on all fours. Meanwhile, Bob managed to finish up the drying and threw the soaked napkins away.

"How can I get the Coke out?" Pete asked one more time. A touch of panic lay in his voice.

"Well, you can just wash your pants!" Bob yapped at the Second Investigator. He, too, had let himself be infected by the general anxiety. "Otherwise, just dye your pants dark brown. It's not so bad!"

"Well, thanks for your help!" Pete laughed bitterly. "I mean it. Thank you very much."

"There! There! I've got it," Jupiter's voice came from under the table. He quickly pressed the 'answer' button. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking..." he said. "Hello? Hello? He hung up. Bummer!"

"He might call back again," Bob said.

Pete kept dabbing the paper napkins on his pants which were still soaking wet and stuck to his thighs. The stain was still black and was also at a very unfavourable place.

"This is not going to work out," Bob commented on the efforts of the Second Investigator.

"And what do you think I should do?" Pete asked desperately.

"There's a hand dryer in the toilet," Bob suggested.

"A hand dryer..." Pete looked at Bob. "And how do you think I'm going to dry my pants there? Should I take it off?" The Second Investigator's voice was filled with annoyance. The situation was more than uncomfortable for him.

"You'll think of something, Pete..." the First Investigator said. "Anyway, now we should deal with the really important thing—the menu." He grabbed the menu and leafed through it. But first, he had to find a substitute for the spilled Coke. "I need a new drink. And to celebrate, I'm gonna try this vanilla-flavoured Cocoa Special."

“You go ahead!” Furiously, the Second Investigator got up and rushed to the toilet. He held both hands in front of his wet pants, but it didn’t help. The stain was just too big to cover it. Fortunately, the other guests had turned back to their food after the ringing of Jupiter’s mobile phone had stopped. Still, Pete thought he could hear a soft whisper every time he passed a table. Probably, it was pure imagination, but when the Second Investigator turned into the narrow corridor to the toilets, he felt relieved.

He opened the door to the men’s room. There was nobody there. Pete went to one of the sinks, stood in front of the mirror—and was startled. The catastrophe was greater than he had expected. The wet patch stretched from pocket to pocket and down to his right knee. Seen in the mirror, it had the shape of the African continent—and almost its dimensions.

“Oh, man...” Pete’s face colour changed to bright red. “I can’t go back out there like this!” He quickly turned on the tap and held paper napkins in the jet. First of all, he had to get the Coke out. He started to dab the stain off with the wet napkins.

“My, my, my, my,” Pete murmured desperately. Cold water was running down his legs. “How am I going to get my pants dry afterwards?”

He looked to the side. The hand dryer was there but it was a bit too high for what he wanted to do. “I knew it,” the Second Investigator mumbled. Anyway, he still used the dryer but it was not too much of a help. Luckily no one else entered the toilet.

After a few minutes of blowing hot air onto his pants, Pete just wanted to leave. He quickly opened the toilet door, hastily walked out, and almost collided with someone. With water dripping from his pants, he misstepped and fell, hitting his head on the wall. Dazed, the Second Investigator slumped down to the floor. The world around him blurred. Then everything became black before his eyes.

2. Pete's Fan

The first thing Pete saw when he opened his eyes was the ceiling. The second thing he saw was a girl—a very attractive girl, as Pete discovered after a few blinks. She had long blonde curls and was about the same age as him.

“Is everything all right?” She bent over him with a worried expression.

Pete tried to see if the girl had green or blue eyes. Only after a few seconds did he realize that she had asked him a question. “I think so,” he replied quickly. “What happened, anyway?”

“Sorry, but I think I got in your way when you came out.” She had a pleasant voice—warm and tender.

“What?”

“It’s my fault, I’m sorry,” the girl said.

“Oh, yeah...” The Second Investigator nodded. Now he remembered again.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“No, no.” He sat up. “It was just... It was the shock. I’ll be fine.”

“Really?” The girl seemed seriously concerned.

Pete was flattered. “Sure, I...” His head was throbbing at the part where he hit the wall. He was sure there would be a big bump, but he didn’t want to show it. He smiled crookedly. “Everything’s fine.”

“Let me help you up,” said the girl.

“Thank you.”

When Pete got up, his eyes fell on his pants—and on the wet patch. The Second Investigator immediately felt blood shoot into his head again. The girl had certainly already seen the stain when Pete was lying on the floor. Maybe he should tell her the story of the Coke mishap to clarify the origin of the stain before the girl put together a story for herself. But maybe it was already too late for that.

Pete’s mind was racing. The girl just looked at him and smiled, which only added to the embarrassment of the Second Investigator. To make matters worse, he suddenly realized that he had not said anything for far too long.

At that moment, the girl’s eyes met Pete’s. A smile spread across her face and she looked at the Second Investigator straight in the eye. “Hey, aren’t you Pete Crenshaw?”

She had a pleasant voice—warm and tender. Pete was confused for a moment, then stuttered sheepishly: “Yes, um... that... that’s me.” The girl was really pretty, he thought and felt his heart pounding. For a few seconds, he thought of Kelly, but the blonde quickly pushed this thought away. “How do you know that?” he asked.

Immediately, her features brightened. More than that, she laughed. And Pete had to admit that he liked her laughter very much.

“I’m a big fan of yours, you know,” she said and Pete had the feeling that she had just conjured up an even more beautiful, even more beguiling smile.

“A fan?” Pete was puzzled.

“Yes!” She gave a beautiful laugh. “Well, I collect every newspaper article about you and your two investigator friends and... that’s why I know everything about you!”

“Really? Everything?” Pete looked at her searchingly. “I mean everything?”

Hedy nodded.

“Okay, then...” Pete said, and thought for a while. “What’s my favourite dish?”

“Macaroni cheese,” it came straight out of her.

“That’s very impressive.” Pete smiled. “Really... very impressive.”

“You can ask me more difficult questions,” the girl said, and again gave her beautiful laugh. “Hey, I haven’t even introduced myself.” The girl stroked her blonde curls behind her ear, and immediately some strands fell back onto her face. “I am Hedra Carlson.” She reached out to Pete. “But everyone calls me Hedy.”

Pete grabbed her hand. It was warm and soft. “Hello, Hedy! And I’m here with —”

“Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews,” Hedy interrupted him. “I know!”

Pete couldn’t take his eyes off Hedy. Feverishly, the Second Investigator thought about what he could say. Time was running out. In a moment, Hedy would give him a friendly nod and say goodbye. He had to prevent that—but he just couldn’t think of how. His head was empty—empty and warm.

Suddenly Hedy said: “May I ask you... something?”

“Sure,” Pete replied happily. “Whatever you want!” He was radiant. She didn’t say goodbye.

“I’m a little uncomfortable...” Hedy said.

“No, you can ask.”

“Would you mind giving me your autograph? For my Pete collection?”

“For your Pete collection?” Once again, the Second Investigator was unable to hide his astonishment.

“Yes. Like I said, I’m collecting everything I can on you and your fellow investigators.” Hedy looked at him uncertainly. “Do you find that... odd?”

“No, no, not at all.” Pete shook his head violently. “You should see the things Bob collects! He’s got folders full of newspaper articles.”

Hedy smiled.

“So, an autograph, huh?” Pete returned to the subject.

“That would be just the greatest thing for me!” Hedy said.

“Yeah, sure. Why not? Do you have a pen? Because I’m afraid I don’t have one.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Hedy handed him a pen. “Here you go. Sorry, I’m all excited.”

“And where should I write on?”

“On your famous business card,” Hedy suggested.

“On our card. Sure. Just a minute...” Pete reached into his trouser pocket and took out one of business cards of The Three Investigators. It said:



The card was slightly soaked from the Coke, but the Second Investigator hardly noticed that. He signed beside his name on the card and then he handed it to Hedy.

“Here you go.” He felt like a movie star.

“Thank you very, very much, Pete! Great. Really.” Hedy looked at the card, beaming with joy. “Say, are you in the midst of an investigation?”

“No.” This time Pete returned her gaze and realized that her eyes were both blue and green. He could not remember ever having seen such eyes before. Suddenly he became very warm. “Well... we just completed one yesterday.”

“That’s great! Anyway, I wouldn’t want to hold you up!” Hedy smiled one more time. “Hey, why don’t you give me a call...” She took a small piece of paper out of her pocket and scribbled some numbers on it. Then she pressed it onto Pete’s hand. “Here’s my number... okay?”

“Yes... uh... I’d love to!” Pete thought he was dreaming. Had this picture-perfect person just given him her phone number? What should he say in reply? “Uh... by the way, my number is at the back of the card...”

“That’s great! Gotta go! See you around!” She gave him a smile, and walked back to the restaurant with her blonde curls swaying up and down.

When Pete came back to the table, his colleagues had already started eating.

“Sorry, Pete! We really couldn’t wait any longer... otherwise I probably would have starved to death.” Jupiter took a big bite of his burger. Dark red barbecue sauce dripped onto his plate.

“It’s all right, Juve.” Pete sat down... and in front of him on the plate was a Cogburn Chicken.

“I wasn’t sure what you wanted.” Jupiter wiped red sauce from his mouth with his napkin.

“It doesn’t matter,” Pete replied calmly. He remembered that he had wanted to order a Classic Ringo but in the meantime, it had become completely irrelevant to him. He wasn’t even really hungry anymore.

“We know you like chicken,” Bob said.

Pete nodded. “Chicken is great...”

“What took you so long anyway?” Bob asked. But the Second Investigator was already not listening. He was turning around, looking for Hedy. She was with an elderly lady, and they were about to leave the restaurant. But even that didn’t bother Pete. He was happy.

“Hey!” Bob flicked around in front of his face. “Earth to Pete!”

“Sorry, what did you say?” Pete blinked like he just woke up.

“I asked what took you so long,” Bob repeated his question.

“I was in the toilet... you know that. I wanted to...” The Second Investigator faltered. He was trying to remember why he had originally gone to the bathroom. “Because of the stain,” he finally said.

“That long?” Bob frowned. “You’ve been gone for almost fifteen minutes!”

“And unfortunately your efforts were not particularly successful either,” Jupiter intervened. “You might as well take your pants to the cleaners.”

“Coke just washes right out,” Bob emphasized one more time. “How many times do I have to say it?”

“Oh, fellas...” Pete smiled blissfully. “Life is beautiful! Don’t you agree?”

Bob put his burger back on the plate. “You’re out of line, Pete.”

“I’m perfectly well,” Pete replied.

“And what are you grinning at anyway?” Bob asked.

“Let it go, Bob. It’s probably some kind of delayed state of shock,” Jupiter said. “A delayed reaction to the Coke accident, so to speak. It’ll probably pass in a moment.”

When they had already reached the dessert—hot brownies with vanilla ice cream to top it off—Pete decided to tell them about his encounter with Hedy Carlson and the autograph. He was very careful to put every detail into words. Pete didn't notice that his friends' interest soon waned—and even if it had, it wouldn't have affected his good mood.

3. A New Case

After Jupiter paid the bill, they left Jill's Place and made their way to Pete's red MG to drive back to the salvage yard.

Although the Second Investigator had his car parked halfway in the shade, it was unbearable when they got into it. Moaning, Jupiter fanned himself with an old brochure. He really had nothing against the famous Californian summer weather, but this blazing heat was simply unbearable. The air that streamed through the open windows into the interior of the car hardly cooled them down at all. With merciless power, the sun burned down from the sky, where no cloud had shown up for what felt like an eternity.

Pete steered his car onto Ocean Drive along the coast. Through downtown Rocky Beach it would have been a lot shorter, but there was less traffic on Ocean Drive in the morning. Besides Pete was in no hurry and went into raptures. "Oh, fellas... what a beautiful day! The sun smiles down from the sky; the wind blows through our hair; the smell of the sea rises in our noses, the seagulls—"

"Pete, please!" Jupiter interrupted him, visibly annoyed. "Spare us your teenage romance! It was a beautiful day until just now..."

Pete looked away in surprise. "What's wrong, Jupe?" He pointed past Jupiter's nose to the outside. "Look! Look at the cute seagulls!"

"Stop it with your stupid seagulls!" Jupiter said to him. "You should concentrate on the road!"

Pete put his hand back on the steering wheel. He did not understand how the First Investigator could be in such a bad mood on such a bright day. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing is wrong with me," Jupiter replied succinctly. "I'm simply not in the mood for your crushes. That's all."

"You're just bitchy because she asked me for an autograph and not you," Pete surmised.

"Oh, nonsense..." Jupiter mumbled and looked out the window. "That has nothing to do with it."

"I'm sure Hedy would have wanted your autograph," Pete tried to cheer up his colleague. "Too bad you were busy gobbling up your hamburger."

"Thank you, Pete," Jupiter replied. "I appreciate your efforts, but it's really not the point."

Moaning, Bob wiped his T-shirt across his forehead which was glistening with beads of sweat. "Your car is a rolling oven, Pete. You can cook a pizza in here!"

"Yeah, sure, unlike your cool Beetle. The shape alone tells us it's a mobile igloo..." Pete mocked.

"No car can withstand these Saharan temperatures," Jupiter commented. "This has been going on for days and it's still getting hotter. Hopefully, the cooling-off that we've been told will happen soon."

Ten minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard. Several days ago, a construction company had started road repair works right in front of the entrance to the yard. At this moment, two construction workers were busy tearing up the road surface with heavy

pneumatic hammers. Pete carefully steered his MG to enter the yard and parked it in front of the yard office.

When the three of them were getting out of the car, a lean man in his forties wearing a trench coat approached them. Despite his narrow face, a stately double chin emerged from his shirt collar. The short black hair stood confusingly away from his head and his hectic winking indicated strong excitement.

“Er... excuse me,” the man said. “I’m looking for a film projector.”

A film projector? It must be a coincidence that this man was looking for a similar item that The Three Investigators had just bought earlier in the day.

“Oh, uh—then I’d best bring you to our storeroom,” Jupiter said. “Is there anything in particular you’re looking for, Mr... uh...”

“Dawson, Sebastian Dawson,” the man replied.

“And I’m Jupiter Jones... Very pleased to meet you.”

Nodding, Dawson continued: “It’s about something specific. I’m interested in... in the Novalux that you bought from Mrs Sullivan this morning.”

Astonished, Jupiter tilted his head. “May I ask how you know about that?”

“Oh, I went to Mrs Sullivan in response to her ad in the newspaper, but unfortunately I was too late,” Mr Dawson said. “She told me that she had already sold it to you and she was kind enough to give me your address.”

“Oh, yes,” Jupiter said. “Well, Mr Dawson, I’m very sorry, but that projector is not for sale. I wonder if I might show you what else we have here.”

The man shook his head vigorously. “No... no thanks. I’m a collector and the Novalux is what I want. Could a fifty dollar uh... offer possibly change your mind?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but that item is not for sale,” Jupe repeated.

An enigmatic smile flitted across Dawson’s face. “Naturally, I uh... understand... say, what about a hundred dollars?”

“Mr Dawson, we really appreciate your generous offer, but we haven’t even checked if the projector still works at all,” Jupiter said.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Mr Dawson replied quickly.

Jupiter could not say exactly why, but he disliked the frantic persistence of the man. He felt himself under pressure. “No, no, you don’t seem to understand me. We want to—”

“Two hundred dollars!” Mr Dawson interrupted him.

Jupiter frowned. So much money for an old film projector? Something was rotten about it—the First Investigator was sure of that. On the other hand, The Three Investigators could use the money well. As usual, their common fund was nearly empty.

Jupiter hesitated and then said: “Perhaps I should have a word with my friends first...”

Mr Dawson nodded, as Jupe pulled his two friends aside. “Fellas, what do you think?” he asked.

“Two hundred dollars!” Pete hissed. He stared at Jupiter imploringly. It was obvious what the Second Investigator thought of the offer—he was determined to accept it.

“Jupe, what are you waiting for?” Bob added.

Pete turned his head to the side so that Mr Dawson couldn’t hear it and whispered softly: “And you only paid five dollars for it! That old projector probably doesn’t even work anymore.”

Bob nodded in agreement. “You don’t even need to check whether it is working or not. For that price, just sell it as is!”

The First Investigator struggled to put his concerns aside, but he succeeded. He didn’t have to smell a dark secret in everything and everyone. Perhaps Mr Dawson was really

nothing more than an eccentric, wealthy collector.

“Then that’s settled,” Jupe said and he walked back to Mr Dawson.

“Very well, Mr Dawson. Two hundred dollars—that seems a fair offer, and we’re happy to accept it,” Jupiter announced.

Bob and Pete visibly had to pull themselves together to avoid spontaneously bursting into cheers. Mr Dawson seemed to be quite content.

Pete took the box containing the projector out of his car’s boot and handed it to Mr Dawson. The man put down the box, opened it and looked inside. “It looks like it is in perfect condition. Thank you very much...”

Mr Dawson reached into the pocket of his trench coat, took out a roll of \$50 notes and counted four of them. “Here you are—two hundred dollars.” He handed the money to the First Investigator. “You really are a good salesman!”

“Thank you very much.” Jupiter put the money in his pocket and tried not to smile too much.

Mr Dawson took the box and headed for the gate.

He was less than ten steps away when it burst out of Bob: “Gee, Jupe! That was some deal!”

“Two hundred dollars!” cried Pete enthusiastically.

Excitedly, The Three Investigators talked in disarray and congratulated each other on their sale. Had they waited a few seconds longer to cheer, they might have heard Mr Dawson say quietly as he left: “Those fools! If they only knew...”

“Just incredible...” Pete couldn’t quite believe it yet. “He actually paid two hundred dollars for that old projector.”

“Yes, fellas,” Jupiter said. “This was indeed a very profitable business.” Suddenly, the First Investigator stopped and his expression changed.

Pete looked at him questioningly. “What’s wrong, Jupe?”

Jupiter quickly took the dollar notes out of his pocket and held them against the sun one by one. He breathed a sigh of relief. “Everything is fine. For a moment I thought—”

“—That he gave you counterfeit money?” Pete added.

“You’ll never know,” Jupiter shrugged, “but these notes are real.”

“There’s no doubt about it!” Bob slapped him on the back laughing.

“This almost calls for a worthy Novalux party,” Jupiter announced beaming with joy. “So I suggest we go to Headquarters and decide how we are going to celebrate our sale of the month!”

The Three Investigators were full of smiles when they entered Headquarters.

Headquarters was actually an old mobile home trailer that they had received as a gift from Uncle Titus a long time ago. The Three Investigators had hidden it under a pile of scrap metal and other junk. Since then, the trailer could only be entered via secret passages. One of them was the Cold Gate, an old and huge refrigerator which was leaning against a pile of junk as if by chance. Inside the fridge, by activating a secret mechanism, the back wall could be pushed aside, revealing a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the main entrance of the trailer.

In addition to a few worn out armchairs and a table, Headquarters was equipped with everything they needed for their investigation work—telephone, fax, a computer with printer and Internet connection, and even a small crime lab, where they analyzed traces and fingerprints. Nearly every available space of the trailer was used to make room for shelves

and cupboards to store diverse investigation equipment and dozens of files containing reports of their earlier cases.

Pete suddenly remembered his Cola-stained pants and he reached for a cabinet where he kept some spare clothes.

"I need to go wash up and change my pants," Pete said and he rushed out of the trailer back into the salvage yard and headed to the yard office.

After a short clean-up and changing into another pair of pants, he walked back out. At that moment, his mobile phone rang.

"The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking."

"Hello, Pete," said the caller. "This is Hedy... Hedy Carlson. Remember me?"

"Oh hi, Hedy," Pete replied in surprise. "Of course, I remember you. We just met this morning!"

"Oh yes... uh... I would like to ask you something," Hedy said.

"Go ahead!"

"Uh... just now when I met you at Jill's Place, I was there with my aunt Julia," she began.

"Oh yes," Pete said. "That must be the elderly lady I saw you with."

"Yes!" she said. "On our way back, I was telling her about you and The Three Investigators and how you have solved so many cases. Well, the thing is... Aunt Julia has a problem at her house. For the past few days, she has been hearing strange thumping sounds on and off at various places around the house. Well, I managed to convince her to engage you three to take on the case."

"Great!" Pete exclaimed. "I tell you what, Hedy. I'm just about to meet Jupiter and Bob. I need to discuss with them, and I'll call you back for more details in a short while."

"Wonderful!" Hedy said happily. "You can call me on my mobile phone!" Then she ended the call.

Pete rushed back into Headquarters and briefed his two colleagues on a potentially new case. The three of them agreed to look into it. Pete switched on the loudspeaker and called Hedy back for more details.

"Two months ago, Aunt Julia bought this house which is just outside Sheldon Forest," Hedy said. "It's a huge, hideous old Colonial-style mansion which was once used as a set for some gloomy medieval movie. It's horrible. Everything is terribly draughty and the windows are somehow positioned that the light from outside never really comes into the rooms."

"My Aunt Julia is crazy about anything to do with the movies. My parents are in Asia at the moment and they have rented our house to a family from Texas. That's why I'm staying with my aunt for the holidays. She's been living in this house for two weeks now, but there has been thumping noises for a few days."

"Did you hear those noises as well?" Pete asked.

"Yes," Hedy replied. "We can't sleep a wink. No one knows what it could be, but Aunt Julia won't leave. She's quite fond of this place."

"If the house is very old, it could be that the installations are causing these noises," Pete remarked.

"No, I know the sound that an old heater or a dripping tap makes. That's not it. Besides, my aunt had the house checked before she bought it," Hedy said. "And there's something else..."

"Oh, what else?" Pete slid uncomfortably on his chair.

“The thumping wanders...”

The Three Investigators looked at each other in surprise.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘it wanders’,” Pete asked.

Jupiter slid back and forth on his chair and began to pinch his lower lip.

“Well, it just wanders. Sometimes it comes from one room, then from another. I know it sounds crazy, but both of us hear it too. It couldn’t have been our imagination.”

“Maybe it’s mice,” Pete hesitantly let himself be heard.

“No, the exterminator found nothing. Besides, how could a mouse strike on a solid wall? I’m not superstitious or anything, but by now I almost believe myself that the house is haunted.”

“And the thumping, when did you first hear it?” Pete continued.

“Four days ago, I couldn’t fall asleep. There is a library in the house and I wanted to get something to read. When I went to switch on the light, I heard a dull thud. The library is on the ground floor and at first, I assumed someone was at the front door. But when I looked through the peephole, there was no one there. So I went back again when the thumping suddenly came from the hall next to me. It was horrible, not just a thump, it sounded like someone was trapped in the walls, and pounding away, fighting for their lives. Then Aunt Julia came running out of her bedroom, but suddenly everything was quiet again. The whole thing didn’t last more than two or three minutes”.

“Okay, what else could you tell us about the house?”

“Wait, let me get my notebook,” Hedy said and there was a pause. “Okay... The house was built in 1897 by an Englishman named Maximilian Edgar Ballantyne. The façade is Colonial-style and inside, it’s horrifying. In any case, Balantyne himself lived in it until his death in 1954. Then his son, Thomas Ballantyne, took over the house until his death twenty-seven years ago. His heirs neither used nor sold the house until a certain Gerald L. Carroll bought it nine years ago and then lived there until his death last year. The house fell to the city, which had it sold at an auction and my aunt won the bid.”

“Is this information reliable?” Pete asked.

“I got them from the auction documents and the real estate agent,” Hedy said.

The First Investigator pinched his lower lip intensely, while Pete gave Bob a searching look.

“Hedy,” Pete said, “could you hold on for a minute?” Then Pete looked at his two colleagues for agreement to take on the case. Both of them nodded.

“This could be an interesting case. We shouldn’t lose any time.” Determined, the First Investigator rubbed his hands together. “Get the address and set up a meeting,” he told Pete.

Pete did just that, hung up and gave his friends a big smile. Bob seemed to be able to read thoughts because he grinned knowingly at Pete. Jupiter’s eyes flashed adventurously.

“The Three Investigators have a new case!” the First Investigator announced.

Immediately, Jupiter laid out the plan: “We will meet Hedy at her aunt’s house, have her show us which rooms the thumping has sounded from so far. This could be a case very much to my taste!”

4. The Thumping Noises

After fifteen minutes, they had reached the commercial area of Sheldon Street. Pete looked over in surprise at a small shop. "Hey! Look at that!"

"What's it all about?" Jupiter asked.

Pete pointed to the street corner. "Look over at that TV shop."

The First Investigator's gaze glided over to the old shop, which had its best years long since gone. Paint was peeling off all over the walls and the shop sign hung over the front door was barely legible. It was a sad picture of slow decay.

"I know it has been closed for some years," Jupiter confirmed. "What about it?"

"Did you see the graffiti next to the door?"

In bewilderment, Jupiter bent out of the window. "Oh..." Now finally he saw what had caught Pete's attention. Four big red symbols were disfiguring the left side of the store front.

"That doesn't look like the typical graffiti of random characters and colours we see elsewhere," Pete said. "Also, I don't see too many graffiti around here in Rocky Beach. Pretty strange."

"Well perhaps you can take an interest in it in case one day we have to deal with a case of graffiti vandals!" Jupiter suggested.

Pete laughed.

Shortly afterwards, they reached Sheldon Forest and Pete turned into a side road. He drove further on.

"We're almost there," Jupiter said, looking at a map and pointing ahead.

On the narrow road, Pete had to drive past a small white van parked by the side before he turned into a circular driveway. At first, he was speechless and his friends were suitably impressed. A magnificent Colonial-style building rose sombrely before them, standing at the beginning of a slight hill that stretched out behind the house.

A smiling Hedy Carlson saw them coming and was already waiting in front of the main entrance. She was dressed sportily rather than overly elegantly. Pete brought the car to a halt in front of the house, and the three of them got out.

"Hello, Hedy," Pete was now standing right in front of her. He was mesmerized because she had put on a very nice perfume that beguiled his senses. He then introduced his friends to her.

"Well, I'm glad you came," she replied.

The three of them took a look at the exterior of the two-storey mansion. The walls were brown and had small windows with tinted glass. In front of the entrance was a covered verandah. The bright summer day faded around the mansion as if it had realized that it was not wanted here. Together with several surrounding trees, this seemed to give the effect that the building sucked in or dimmed the light around it. Behind the mansion, a gentle slope with dense woodland stretched upwards.

"Crazy, isn't it?" Hedy walked up the stairs to the front door and opened it. "But just wait until you're inside," she said and led The Three Investigators inside.

They stood in a huge hall which rose up the two storeys. However, it was lit only by the light coming in from a few small windows. The floor had dark grey tiles. Altogether, it created a strange atmosphere with billowing shadows appearing everywhere.

From where they were standing, they could see a gallery on the first floor, circling the hall and lined all round on one side by a wooden balustrade. Under the tall ceiling was a gigantic chandelier with countless crystals, surely worth a fortune. Illuminated by the diffuse light, the patterns seemed to dance. The whole thing looked to the three boys like a huge, gloomy cave.

“Goodness!” Pete turned in circles, aghast. What was a beautiful girl like Hedy doing in a place like this, he thought.

Opposite the entrance, an archway broke through the wall and the boys could catch a glimpse of a staircase behind it. To the left and right of the archway stood several human-sized statues—statues of medieval knights in armour, some with headgear, some without.

“These statues were here when Aunt Julia bought the house,” Hedy explained. “We believe that they were movie props from the time when this house was used for a castle setting. That was probably a long time ago.”

Jupiter stepped up to one of the statues. This knight stood on a simple rectangular platform, wearing a full suit of plate armour that featured decorative pale white symbols etched across its surface, as well as decorative gold edging along the shoulders, knees, and arms. On one hand was a downward-turned sword with a gold hilt. The armour was completed by a sallet helmet with a visor, as well as a traditional round shield that featured matching gold decorations.

“Creepy,” Pete commented. “It feels like you can see something moving out of the corner of your eye.”

Bob went up to look at another statue. This one depicted a knight standing tall and proud, wearing armour and a white surcoat emblazoned with a red cross. In one hand was a shield that also featured the red cross, while the other hand held the hilt of the sword sheathed at the side.

Hedy came up to him. “What do you make of this?”

“Hmm...” he mumbled. “I think I’ve seen a knight like this in one of the books from the library but I can’t specifically recall it... should be from the Crusades.”

“Nice,” Hedy commented. “I like knights in movies, and statues in museums, but not knight statues in a place where you live in. They all look so terrifying. At night, when the sun isn’t shining through the windows, the only source of light is the chandelier. The crystals refract the weak light into all the colours, creating an eerie effect. It’s horrible.”

“Hedy,” Pete asked, “can I take some photos of these statues? They are for our records.”

“Sure,” she replied.

Pete took a digital camera out of his backpack and pressed the power button. However, nothing moved. He tried it three more times, but the device was silent and the lens was locked.

“Oh, no. Jupe,” Pete gasped.

The First Investigator turned to his friend in astonishment. “What?”

“Well, here!” Frustrated, Pete passed the camera to Jupe. “It has stopped working again. It went out, just like that! You said you were going to take care of it!”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry.” Frowning, Jupiter took the stubborn device and looked at it from all sides. “It’s probably a contact problem in the battery compartment. Just a moment...”

Jupiter took out the batteries and put them back again. Within a short moment, there was a familiar humming sound.

“Voilà!” Grinning, Jupiter gave the camera back to his friend. “You just need an expert, and then you’ll be fine.”

“Especially when the expert is an incredibly lucky man,” Pete growled softly, grabbed the camera and took the first photos. Then he examined the result in the small display.

Jupiter had moved on in the meantime. He found that the archway led to the rear part of the mansion which comprised two storeys. There were several doors to the left and right of the staircase.

The first door on the right was open. Behind it was a room just as dark as the hall. It was the library and there were shelves up to the top of the walls, filled with books.

Jupiter went to a large desk that stood in the middle. In front of him, opposite the door, were two narrow windows, secured by a grille from the outside. Here, too, the windows served their purpose only poorly and when Jupe looked up at the ceiling, he saw that there was no major source of light. Only on the table and next to the niches under the windows were small lamps.

“The books were already here when my aunt bought the house. So were most of the furnishings.” Hedy said as she came in with Pete and Bob. “It’s a glorious summer’s day outside, but in here you’d think dusk was falling,” she continued.

Bob went to the shelves and looked at the spines of the books. “Where did your aunt actually get the money to buy this house?” he asked. “Was the house cheap?”

Hedy sat down on the desk. “No, it wasn’t cheap. Aunt Julia recently received a considerable inheritance and used it to pay for this!” She made a sweeping gesture with her hand.

“Where is your aunt right now?” Jupiter asked.

“With a fortune teller.”

“Huh?”

“Shortly after we moved in here, she met this woman and she’s quite taken with her,” Hedy said. “Well, as long as she doesn’t plan to move in here... How about I show you the rest of the rooms on the ground floor?”

Once outside the library, Hedy pointed to the other doors one by one. “Here next to the library is the study. Next to it is the drawing room. On the other side, the first door leads into the games room. The second door is to the dining room.”

They entered the rooms one by one and finally, they were in the dining room. Like the library, there were two narrow windows opposite the door. Between them hung a life-size portrait of a grim-faced man. Wall-mounted chandeliers were fixed at regular intervals on the side walls, providing the only source of light. It seemed as if the architect had tried to exclude any superfluous light.

“By the way, that guy there is the architect.” Hedy nodded at the painting.

“Must be great to let him look at your food while you eat,” Pete remarked uneasily.

“Aunt Julia and I usually eat in the kitchen... or out.”

Back outside the dining room, Hedy led them to the last door, which was to the kitchen. Finally, she also showed them the conservatory which stretches across the entire back of the house.

“With so many rooms here, one could easily get lost,” Pete commented.

Hedy laughed. “Yes, I was thoroughly confused when I came here at first. But wait, there are still more rooms upstairs... and in the basement!”

Hedy then led them back into the hall. Here, she looked around and asked: “Do you hear anything?”

The Three Investigators listened for a moment.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Jupiter replied.

“That’s it! Not only is it so gloomy in here, the walls are so thick that outside noises, if any, are muffled. No birds chirping, no car noise or anything else can be heard. It’s like being in a tomb.”

The four stood there dejectedly, listening to the silence. Finally, Hedy shrugged her shoulders and told them to follow her. Just as they were about to go through the archway, Pete heard a dull thud close to his ear. He flinched and jumped to the side. It remained silent for a moment and Jupiter was about to attribute the sound to Pete’s over-stimulated nerves when suddenly, he himself heard a thump next to him.

The noise moved away from the archway towards the library. It started as a soft thumping and increased into a wild pounding that was echoed back by the round hall. It seemed to come from all directions at once, encircling Hedy and The Three Investigators.

Hedy covered her ears with both hands, trying to drown out the noise. “It’s never been this bad before.”

Pete looked around in panic. It was as if three or more people were thumping on the walls in panic. The noises moved around them and yet there was no one to be seen. Then, as if the originator of these noises had been exhausted, it slowly died away and turned into a scraping-like sound on stone. Finally, it went off completely.

Slowly, Hedy put her hands down again and looked at the three of them.

The First Investigator cleared his throat. “I suggest we go outside and confer there.”

Wordlessly, they opened the door and stepped out onto the verandah.

“I don’t know about you,” Hedy began. “But I’d like to be far away from this house. Let’s go and sit on the lawn there.”

After the three of them had settled down on the grass in the shade of a huge tree, they were silent for a while.

Hedy was the first to start talking again. “So, what do you think?”

5. A Visit From Mrs Fielding

After getting a first impression of the mansion and having heard the thumping, Jupiter decided to go back to Headquarters. He had told Hedy that the three of them would return to the mansion around 7 pm.

Twenty minutes later, they had reached The Jones Salvage Yard, and they scrambled into Headquarters.

"It's another oven in here," grumbled Pete as he opened the trailer door. "Such high temperatures should be banned!"

"That's right," Bob agreed as he switched on a large floor fan. "A few more degrees and we can open up a sauna and get in."

"If only the Cold Gate would live up to its name..." Pete remarked and sceptically, he looked over at Bob. "Is the fan really running at full power?"

"What do you think? If it spins any faster, it'll take off," Bob said.

Jupiter did not seem to be paying attention to his friends' conversation, instead he slumped into this chair and continued to pinch his lower lip. Pete gave his colleague a sad look and sighed.

"What's your impression of the thumping," Bob broke the silence.

"Man Bob, it was awful," Pete replied. "It sounded like umpteen hands pounding on the walls. So I wouldn't regret it if I never had to go back to that house again."

"You mean you wouldn't want to meet Hedy again?" Bob teased.

"No. We could always meet elsewhere," Pete replied.

"I admit that was quite an impressive event we were allowed to witness," the First Investigator stated calmly. "Nevertheless, I still believe that we are capable of unravelling this mystery," he continued a little louder to drown out Pete's groans.

"So, what's the plan?" Pete asked.

"First, I'll call Cotta and see what we can learn about Gerald L. Carroll," Jupiter decided as he reached for the phone and dialled a number. However, the First Investigator only had a short conversation. "Inspector Cotta is unfortunately not in the office now. I have left a message asking him to call back," he announced. "Meanwhile, we can still proceed with our case. My suggestion would be this—Bob and I will go to City Hall and see whether we can get the blueprints of the mansion. Meanwhile, Pete, could you go look for the longest measuring tape you could find, perhaps get four of them."

"What are you wanting to do with the measuring tapes?" Pete asked.

"We're going to measure every room and check the dimensions with that on the blueprints," Juve said. "In this way, we can discover any hidden passages or tunnels that might be there... After you get the measuring tapes, Pete, go straight to the Carlson mansion where we'll meet up again... Yes, I think we'll do it this way. It's nearly four o'clock now. We'll meet at Hedy's latest by seven. Tell your parents you're spending the night here at my place."

"You want to spend the night in that house?" Pete looked at Jupiter in horror. "Do you even care if we want to?"

The First Investigator looked at his friend thoughtfully. "It is, of course, up to you to follow us. But consider what an exciting adventure you might miss. Besides, we might need you! Don't forget, Hedy will be there as well," he said and winked at Pete.

Resigned, Pete threw his arms in the air and sighed. "Well, if you put it that way, what more can I say?"

After a hearty meal at home, Pete searched for the longest measuring tape he could find. He finally found two five-metre measuring tapes in the storeroom and took them to his MG. On the way to Sheldon Forest, he dropped by a DIY store and bought two more measuring tapes.

When he reached the Carlson mansion, he slowed down and parked by the side of the driveway a short distance from the main entrance. There he looked at the mansion and silently felt that it was indeed hideous.

Absorbed in the sight, he hardly heard a limousine pulling up to him. Then the rear window rolled down and a woman's voice called out: "Excuse me, maybe you can help me..."

Pete stepped up to the expensive car. In the back sat a woman with perfectly coiffed blonde hair. Her age was difficult to estimate. She was wearing an expensive costume, of which Pete could only see the pink jacket, a pearl necklace and almost shrill-looking glasses.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"This mansion here, do you know if it's for sale?" She gestured vaguely with her hand in the direction of Julia Carlson's house. Pete could see that she wore at least one ring with swanky-looking stones on each of her fingers. Only the plain gold ring, with an engraved pattern on the right ring finger, didn't quite match the others.

"As far as I know, the new owner has only recently moved in." Pete said.

"Well, I think I'll give it a try anyway. Thank you, my boy." She turned to her chauffeur. "Paul, drive on to the house. I'm going to pay the owner a visit."

As she spoke, the window wound up and the limousine started to move. Pete looked at the car move up to the driveway and then he hurried to follow as well. When he walked up to the car, the driver was just opening the back door. The lady got out and let out a theatrical scream. "Isn't it adorable?"

Just as she was about to go up the stairs to the front door, it opened and Hedy appeared in the doorway.

Without hesitation, the stranger got straight to the point. "Good afternoon, young lady. My name is Elisabeth Margrete Fielding and I wish to speak to the owner of this house." She spoke with a slight British accent and carefully emphasized each word.

For a moment, Hedy stared at the woman in surprise. "I'm afraid my aunt isn't here at the moment. What is it? Maybe I can help you?"

The lady smiled weakly. "Well, I have to speak to your aunt, my child. When is she expected back?"

"I don't know." Hedy's voice had cooled noticeably.

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to deliver my card to her and ask her to get back to me." With these words, she handed Hedy a cream-coloured business card.

Hedy looked sceptically at the print. "And what reason should I give her?"

"Well, I would like to have a chat with her about this extraordinary mansion. Goodbye." With that, Mrs Fielding turned and strode back to her car.

Pete and Hedy watched as the chauffeur closed the door behind her, got into the driver's seat and drove away.

The Second Investigator took a look at the business card and said: “Funny woman. She asked me if the house was for sale.”

“I’m sure Aunt Julia won’t sell it, but I wish she would.” Hedy opened the front door wide and gestured Pete to enter. “Jupiter and Bob aren’t here yet. Ready for the House of Horrors?”

Pete could only smile weakly. This building was really impressive, almost overwhelming. When he entered the hall, he audibly sucked in the air. Now in the twilight, the hall seemed even more eerie than he had seen it earlier. Shadows danced everywhere and the statues seemed to be lurking and watching them. Here in the house, it was noticeably cooler than outside and Pete felt himself getting a slight chill.

With a click, Hedy switched on the chandelier, but instead of bathing the hall in bright light, the light seemed to become even more diffuse. Now Pete had the feeling that the statues were moving, encircling them—that they were imperceptibly changing their posture, ready to pounce on them at the slightest inattention. After the front door slammed shut, a silence weighed on them both that was so heavy that Pete felt the need to duck.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Hedy asked.

Pete shoved his cold hands into his trouser pockets. “That’s not the word that came to my mind.” His voice echoed off the walls and the echo turned into a whisper that seemed to come from all directions. The statues seemed to laugh at him. The Second Investigator felt an oppressive feeling in his chest.

There! Did something move? Pete shook his head. He was already starting to freak out. He glanced at Hedy, but she was staring at one of the statues.

“Sometimes I feel like someone is in the armour watching me.” Her whisper sounded loud and sharp in the silence. Pete was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

It was cold and dark. Even though the hall was so high, it seemed to constrict them. The twilight reached out to envelope and trap them. Pete was about to say something when suddenly—

Boom! Boom!

Two loud booms broke the silence.

Hedy flinched and Pete jumped to the side. So was that the thumping? Pete had hoped he might be lucky and never hear it again. Beside him, Hedy had raised a hand.

In the meantime, Jupiter and Bob had managed to get the blueprints of the mansion from the city archives. On the way, they hardly said anything, only now and then Bob heard Jupiter grumble softly.

A short distance before the driveway of the mansion, they saw a large black limousine coming out. Bob turned to his friend. “Looks like Hedy had a visitor.”

As the road was narrow, Bob had to stop behind a small white van parked by the side of the road to allow the limousine to pass first. Through the tinted windows, they could not see who was in it. Jupiter looked thoughtfully at the limousine and commented: “A luxurious car—almost as beautiful as Worthington’s Rolls-Royce.”

When they turned into the driveway, they saw Pete’s car parked by the side. Bob parked his Beetle just behind the MG and both of them went to the main entrance.

Pete and Hedy remained motionless in the hall and listened.

“Was that it?” Pete looked around.

“I don’t know.” Hedy hesitated. “It sounded different somehow.”

Boom! Suddenly Hedy started laughing loudly. She went to the front door and pulled it open. Jupiter and Bob were standing in front of her, looking at her in amazement. Jupiter still had his hand up to push the huge door knocker one more time.

Slowly Pete exhaled and scolded himself for being a scaredy-cat. He had allowed himself to be influenced by the mood of the house and had imagined ghosts everywhere.

“Is something wrong?” Jupiter eyed the still laughing Hedy suspiciously. She shook her head. Pete was grateful to her for not saying anything.

Jupiter and Bob entered the house and Hedy locked the door. Immediately, there was dead silence.

Bob cleared his throat, not so much because he had to, but more to break the silence. “Did you just have a visitor?” he asked.

“A woman was here. She wanted to see Aunt Julia because she’s interested in the house. But I doubt she has a chance. Shortly after we moved in here, a real estate agent contacted Aunt Julia saying that someone offered to buy this house but she didn’t want to sell. I don’t think she has changed her mind yet.”

Jupiter thought for a moment and then rubbed his hands together. “We should get started. There is a lot to do.”

With that, he strode ahead and went into the dining room. There he told Bob to spread out the blueprints on the table.

“My plan for today is as follows...” The First Investigator began. “First, we will finish the tour upstairs, then we will start measuring the rooms.”

“So you’re assuming there are secret passages or secret rooms here?” Hedy held the spread ends of a blueprint and all four studied the plans attentively.

“Since I firmly believe that there are no ghosts, there must be a way for someone to cause the thumping noises.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “And since there was no one but us in the hall when the thumping was heard today, logically there must be something behind the walls.”

A noise penetrated through the open door to the four youths.

“Hedy? Are you there?”

“Aunt Julia!”

Hedy ran out into the hall while The Three Investigators hurriedly rolled up the blueprints. Pete and Bob followed the girl. Jupiter stowed the rolls behind the door and then joined his friends.

“Aunt Julia, do you remember I told you about The Three Investigators—Jupiter, Pete and Bob?”

“Of course. Nice to meet the three of you!” Julia Carlson threw her arms in the air theatrically.

“Hello, Mrs Carlson.” The First Investigator stiffly straightened to full height.

“I’m just showing the boys the house, Aunt. I hope you don’t mind,” Hedy said.

“Why, no, my dear. Isn’t it wonderful?”

A sudden clearing of the throat interrupted the conversation. All five turned towards the sound. Standing at the door was a well-dressed man with a moustache. He was almost one-hundred tall, dark-haired, slightly greying at the temples, and held a walking stick in one hand.

“Oh, forgive me.” Mrs Carlson hurried to her companion’s side. “Where was I with my thoughts. May I introduce—Alexei Swarnoff. He is also an avid collector of movie props. This is my niece Hedy and her friends.”

The stranger took a step forward and held out his hand. One after the other, he shook the hands of The Three Investigators and Hedy.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance." He bowed gallantly. His voice was deep and pleasant, with a slight accent that the three friends could not immediately place.

"Hedy, my dear," Mrs Carlson turned back to her niece. "I'm going to Los Angeles today for an auction and I'm going to stay in a hotel there. Do you think—"

"That's all right, Aunt Julia." Hedy interrupted her. "Jupiter, Pete and Bob are staying over tonight. You don't have to worry."

Julia Carlson looked relieved. Her companion stood silently beside her, watching The Three Investigators with interest.

"Well Alexei, we should get going if we want to get to the auction on time."

Mr Swarnoff bowed slightly. "We can leave right away."

"Yes, right after I get my bag," Mrs Carlson said and rushed up the stairs to her room.

Shortly, she returned with a small suitcase. Mr Swarnoff took the suitcase and offered her his arm with a soft giggle. Julia Carlson hooked it and Mr Swarnoff said goodbye with a brief nod to the four of them.

"Have a good evening, dears." Mrs Carlson said before the door closed behind them. The Three Investigators and Hedy were alone again.

"Who was that?" Pete looked at Hedy questioningly.

Hedy just shrugged her shoulders and sighed. "I have no idea. I have never seen that man in my life. He must be yet another new acquaintance of my aunt."

"Well, we should turn our attention back to the urgent matter we are here for." Jupiter cleared his throat. "First, let's finish the house tour upstairs." He gestured to Hedy to go ahead.

At the staircase, Hedy led them up to the first floor. As could be seen earlier from the ground floor, there was a gallery. Now, they could also see two doors leading to the back.

The left door led to two guest rooms and one bathroom. Each room had a four-poster bed with a bedside table, a small dresser and two armchairs under the windows. Like the hall, both rooms appeared gloomy with limited light coming in through the windows.

Further back, there were three smaller rooms with sloping ceilings, wooden floors and small windows. Hedy explained that they were either used as storerooms or were empty.

They went back to the gallery and went in through the right door. This led to two large bedrooms, two smaller children bedrooms, two bathrooms, and finally a playroom.

Satisfied, they came back down to the ground floor and entered the basement through the kitchen. A huge vault took up most of the floor plan. Columns stood at regular intervals. A few lamps hung offset from the ceiling, spreading a dim light. At one back corner was a modern heating system. Otherwise, the room was empty.

Then there were two doors. Behind the first was a room with many shelves on the wall. On a few shelves, they could see old bottles of wine covered with a thick layer of dust. The rest of the shelves, however, were empty.

Near the second door, Jupiter noticed random grooves on the concrete floor that probably indicated that heavy equipment must have been placed here before. Behind the door was a chamber that was occupied by a large furnace.

"Wow!" Jupiter looked at the furnace in surprise. "Was the house heated with this in the past?"

"I don't know," Hedy said. "As far as I know, when my aunt moved in, the heating system was already installed."

"I suggest we go back upstairs. Our next task is already waiting for us," Jupiter said.

6. An Intruder Appears

The Three Investigators and Hedy sat down at the large table in the dining room. Jupiter unrolled the blueprints.

“Pete, did you bring the measuring tapes?” When he nodded, Jupiter continued speaking: “Here’s what I’ve been thinking about. I am firmly convinced that the thumping is of human origin. Since no one but us was in the hall, there must inevitably be some way of producing these sounds elsewhere. I am sure that we will find a secret passage in this house. As far as I can see, the plans are in order. Now we have to find out if they correspond to reality.”

He looked at his friends. Bob and Hedy nodded and Pete looked at him sceptically.

“I suggest that we will split up and measure the rooms. We will also need to inspect the walls. Slap on it with your palm and see if it makes the same noises as those we heard. Bob and Hedy will take the first floor and Pete and I will take the ground floor and basement.”

Pete wanted to protest against going to the basement, but in front of Hedy, he decided not to.

The First Investigator rolled up the blueprints. Then he rummaged in his backpack and brought out notepads and pens. “We have to write down the measurements of each room and then compare them with the plans,” he explained and handed each of them a pad, a pen, and a measuring tape. “Let’s go!”

Bob and Hedy disappeared to the first floor and Pete stood in front of Jupiter.

“Where do you want to start—the hall or the library?” Jupiter asked.

Pete hesitated. “I’ll leave the books to you, so I’ll take the hall.”

“All right. If anything happens, just shout.” With that, Jupiter turned and went into the library.

For a moment, Pete stood alone in the hall. No sound came to him from outside. It was as quiet as a tomb—and almost as dark.

Pete let his gaze wander. Suddenly he faltered. Did something move there? He stared at the spot, but there was nothing. Now here on the other side... wasn’t someone there? The Second Investigator narrowed his eyes. No, he had been mistaken again.

There were too many shadows in the twilight. The statues were waiting for him to turn his back on them. He felt uneasy, no matter where he looked, everywhere these statues stood and seemed to be watching him. He always had one or two behind him, their eyes boring into his back. He spun around to keep them all in view until he felt dizzy.

Jupiter stood in the middle of the library and thought about where to start. He decided to check all the books first. He sighed softly. That would certainly take him two or three hours.

He positioned the small stepladder and climbed to the top shelf. Carefully he pulled out one book after the other and scanned the back of the shelf. After the eighth book, he sneezed violently three times in a row. He wondered when the dust had last been wiped off. Then he stopped. If someone had tampered with the books, he should be able to find out easily. He only had to look for places where the dust layer was no longer intact.

However, he only found a few places that could almost be called clean, but when he pulled out the books and checked the shelves and the back, he found nothing. Having thus

roughly searched all the shelves, he took out the measuring tape from his pocket and was set to measure the room.

Suddenly a scream broke the silence.

Bob was on the first floor and searching the first room. He wasn't sure if they would find anything. True, Jupiter was probably right and the thumping was somehow created by someone.

So if Jupiter was right, which he usually was, there had to be at least one secret passage here somewhere. Bob began to slap the walls with his palm. He had to grin as he did so. If Pete heard the sound, he would surely think that the haunting was starting again. He paused. Was that a possibility? Maybe someone had been hiding on the first floor and the walls simply carried the sound down. He would have to talk to Jupiter about that possibility later.

It was stuffy in the room. Since Mrs Carlson had not begun to use this room, no one had probably aired it yet. Bob decided to open a window. Just as he drew the curtain open, a scream rang out from downstairs.

Hedy looked around her bedroom. She knew that there was no secret passage or anything like that behind the walls, because she had already examined it thoroughly when she moved in. So all she had to do was to measure it.

Her room was a corner room and it had two windows. As one window faced west, she had a beautiful view of the sunset. It was her favourite time to be here as the sun bathed the room in a warm golden light. This was almost a luxury in this house, and for a moment, the dark shadows in the corners disappeared.

She couldn't understand what her aunt saw in the house. If she were her, she would immediately call that strange woman who came in the limousine and sell her the house. While she was thinking about the lady, she remembered that she had forgotten to tell her aunt about her... but Hedy didn't think Aunt Julia would sell the house anyway.

While Hedy was standing at the window brooding, she caught a glimpse of a shadow down in the garden by the house. She wondered if she had imagined it when she heard someone scream.

Pete was kneeling under one of the windows when the sound of footsteps caught his attention. He lifted his head to look out the window and found himself face-to-face with a stranger who was looking into the hall.

Both yelled out in fright and while Pete fell backwards onto the seat of his trousers in shock, the intruder turned and ran away. The Second Investigator hurriedly scrambled to his feet and pushed open the window. When Jupiter, attracted by the screams, rushed into the hall, he saw Pete climb out of the window and sprint away.

The First Investigator immediately ran to the front door. At the same moment, Bob and Hedy appeared on top of the stairs.

"Go outside!" Jupiter commanded and the two ran down the stairs.

The First Investigator yanked open the door and all three rushed into the driveway. A little further towards the road, they could just make out Pete. Before they were halfway down the driveway, however, they heard an engine roar and fade into the distance. Pete stood at the side of the road and looked desperately at a car speeding away.

“Oh darn,” he muttered as Jupiter came up to him, breathing heavily. “I can’t catch up to him!”

“Did you get the licence plate number?” Gasping, Jupiter put his hand on his colleague’s shoulder.

“No, the licence plate was too dirty.” Pete was deeply disappointed. Suddenly his face brightened.

“However, I have something else. There was a sticker from a car rental company on the back of the bumper... but I don’t know which one,” he concluded dejectedly.

“What happened?” Hedy asked as she and Bob came up. “I heard someone screaming and suddenly we’re in this wild chase. Who was that guy?”

Pete shook his head. “I don’t know. I was measuring the wall under one of the windows and when I looked up, that guy was staring into the hall. He yelled out and took off, and I went after him. Now he’s gone and I have no idea what he wanted.”

Disappointed, the Second Investigator slumped his shoulders.

In the meantime, it was getting dark. While walking back to the house, Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully. Abruptly he stopped. “Pete, what did the man look like? Can you describe him?”

“He was tall, slim and had dark hair, other than that, it was hard to tell because I was kneeling. That’s all I could make out in the short time. The car was quite dusty, but the colour is dark blue—a dark blue Dodge.”

“Hmm...” The First Investigator considered and then turned to Hedy. “At the auction, were there many bidders for this house?”

“There were a few at the beginning, but as the price went up and up, there was only Aunt Julia and someone else on the phone.”

“Do you happen to know whether it was a man or a woman?”

“I don’t know.” Hedy shook her head. “All I know is that it was an anonymous bidder.”

“All right.” Jupiter took a few more steps and then stopped again. “So here’s what we have so far—first, an anonymous bidder; second, someone offered to buy the house after your aunt moved in; third, the mysterious thumping noises; fourth, a woman who wants to buy the house... Why now of all times? Coincidence?”

“So this woman could have been the anonymous bidder, or the person who offered to buy it later,” Bob suggested. “Maybe she’s still trying to get her hands on the house. And don’t forget, now there is this intruder... You think there’s some connection?”

“Yes!” The First Investigator nodded decisively. “I don’t think it’s a coincidence. My gut tells me there’s a connection and I’m convinced we’ll find it... but I think that in order to find out the ‘who’ and the ‘how’, we must first figure out the ‘why’. The rest will work itself out.” With these words, Jupiter entered the house.

“His confidence is what I want.” Shaking his head, Pete followed him.

When everyone was gathered back in the house, Jupiter suggested a change of tasks. “Before it gets too dark, we should go note down the measurements of the outer wall. Then we continue with the remaining rooms. After that, we can compare our results with the blueprints. If there are secret passages or secret rooms in this house, we will find them this way. And tonight we will take turns keeping watch. Who knows, maybe our friend will come back again.”

It was agreed that Jupiter would take the first watch, Pete the second and finally Bob the last. Then, the four of them split up to continue the tasks.

7. The Walking Statue

Pete growled unwillingly. He couldn't sleep so he got up, walked to the window and pushed aside the curtains. However, he couldn't see much through the dark tinted glass. All of a sudden, he heard a noise and turned around. A figure appeared at the door that made him flinch. It was a deadly pale man with an eye patch and his mouth was wide open!

Pete's lips trembled. The figure looked like a ghost pirate with a cold, staring eye and a twitching mouth. Slowly the pirate moved towards him. Stunned, Pete felt rooted to the floor, unable to move. As the pirate crept nearer, Pete threw up his arms to protect himself, and all of a sudden, he heard someone calling his name. Startled, he sat up. It was dark and he heard a low moan beside him. Suddenly he remembered where he was.

"Jupe?"

Again someone groaned.

"Is that you, Jupe?" Pete was getting restless. Why didn't the First Investigator answer?

"You punched my nose," Jupiter finally replied. "What's got into you?"

The Second Investigator breathed a sigh of relief. There was no ghost pirate. It was only Jupiter trying to wake him up.

"Has anything happened?"

"No, everything was quiet," Jupiter said. "I'm going to hit the sack now. It's your turn to keep watch."

Pete muttered to himself: "I have clearly chosen a wrong hobby..."

"Good luck, Pete!" the First Investigator said and then yawned.

"... A completely wrong hobby!" Pete mumbled.

He got up, slipped on his trousers and shoes, and made his way downstairs. It was pitch dark and the flashlight Jupiter had given him shone little light, making the shadows seem even darker and more threatening.

Pete sighed softly. Sometimes he had to secretly agree with Bob. The First Investigator's penchant for spooky events was a real pain in the neck sometimes. He almost hoped that this night would pass without any incidents.

By now, he had reached the hall. It was just in time, because the flashlight went out with a faint flicker. "Great! Just great! The batteries are gone!" Pete muttered softly to himself to break the silence. He shook the flashlight, but nothing happened. Carefully, he crept to the front door and sat down on the pillows and blankets Hedy had prepared for them. Then he began to wait. Every half hour, he was to make his rounds to check the ground floor.

The measurements of the early evening had not given them any new insights. As far as they could see, all the data matched the blueprints. Nowhere had they been able to find a deviation. The comparison with the dimensions of the outer wall was also correct. So there were neither secret passages nor secret rooms in this house.

After a while, Pete could make out the outlines of the statues. When he had waited for almost twenty minutes, his eyes began to fall shut. The Second Investigator changed his posture and rubbed his eyes. If this continued, he would fall asleep.

Suddenly he startled. He had heard something. A soft rustling, as if someone had moved carefully.

“Jupe? Bob?” Pete listened into the darkness. “Hedy, is that you?”

He shook the flashlight once more and switched it on. A faint light penetrated the darkness around him. Slowly he shone the light around him, but after a moment, the light went out again. Attentively and with bated breath, the Second Investigator listened, but it remained silent. Scaredy-cat, he scolded himself. Slowly he exhaled and relaxed again.

The atmosphere in the house made him expect to see ghosts and then actually see them. He had probably dozed off and only dreamed the noise. All was quiet in the house, his friends were asleep upstairs and the house was too far from the road to hear any traffic.

Pete decided to move around a little. He carefully examined the hall, but in the darkness he could hardly make out anything. The light of the full moon filtered in through the window and dimly illuminated the statues, but the light was not enough to make out any details.

As Pete began to walk up and down, his footsteps echoed loudly like thunderclaps through the hall. Suddenly, he heard a noise again. Something was scuffling, like fabric rustling. He looked in the direction he thought it was coming from and was startled.

Pete saw a shadow rising near the archway. It seemed to be slowly growing and getting bigger. Ponderously, the figure straightened up. Pete was transfixed. The figure detached itself from the darkness and walked towards him with careful, shuffling steps. It was one of the knight statues! One of the statues had come to life!

The eyes of the statue glistened in the darkness. Pete heard it hiss softly and raise the sword it was holding. The Second Investigator wanted to scream but could only manage a groan. The statue came closer and closer and then pointed the sword at him.

Suddenly Pete’s rigidity broke. He frantically jumped up and searched the wall for the light switch. Again and again, he glanced over his shoulder as he scanned the walls. Finally he found the switch and, relieved, he flipped it. In the light, the ghostly figure would disappear, for sure. But nothing happened.

Panic-stricken, Pete tried again and again, the click resounding loudly through the darkness, but it remained dark. The walking statue hissed louder and louder, the echo increased the hissing to a howl that enveloped Pete.

When the statue was barely two metres away from him, Pete bent down and felt for the flashlight. In the dark, he aimed it at the figure. He knew he only had one shot. The Second Investigator hurled the flashlight at the figure and then ran. He heard a cry of pain as he continued to run towards the stairs. Now he also had his vocal cords under control again and he began to yell: “Help! Help!”

Upstairs in their room, Jupiter and Bob sat up in their beds.

“That’s Pete!” The First Investigator had recognized the voice immediately.

In no time at all, they jumped out of bed and rushed out to the staircase. There they met Hedy, who had collided with Pete at the top of the stairs.

“What’s going on here?” Hedy said. “Why aren’t the lights on?”

Breathless, Pete picked himself up. “The statue. It walked towards me.” he gasped as he leaned on the railing.

“What?” Bob exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“One of the statues moved and tried to attack me.”

All four of them looked worriedly down the stairs, but there was hardly anything to be seen in the darkness. For a moment, they were silent and listened, but no sound could be heard.

“I would suggest you slowly tell us what happened, Pete.” Jupiter turned to his friend, trying to radiate assurance and calm.

The Second Investigator, still pale and breathless, gazed down the stairs into the hall. He couldn't believe that everything was quiet again. He hadn't imagined the statue walking, had he?

Slowly, he told his friends how the statue had moved and walked towards him. After he had finished, all four were silent for a moment. Jupiter was about to speak when a soft thud sounded from the hall. It sounded evenly, as if someone was thumping on a wall.

Then a series of thumping invaded, louder and more irregular. It swelled, became more violent and pierced the darkness.

The Three Investigators and Hedy stood frozen at the top of the staircase, unable to move a muscle. Instead, they looked down to the hall, terrified. After a few minutes, the thumping calmed down and then faded away completely.

8. Bob Researches

The next morning, The Three Investigators packed up their things as they wanted to go back to Headquarters to plan their further course of action.

All four of them had not slept after Hedy and Jupiter had put back the fuses in the basement that someone had removed. They spent the night examining every statue and conscientiously searching the entire ground floor. The front door as well as the back door and the exit at the conservatory had been locked and bolted from the inside and the windows on the ground floor were all secured. No one could have entered and left the house without leaving traces. The Three Investigators and Hedy were faced with a puzzle.

Just as The Three Investigators were about to leave the house, the phone rang and Hedy went to answer it. "Hello? ... No, she's not here... Yes... Yes, I'll pass that on. Goodbye." Hedy put down the phone and turned to the Three Investigators. "That was Aunt Julia's fortune teller."

"Who is she actually?" Bob asked.

"Well, they met by chance and this Madam Zorina, as she calls herself, immediately sensed 'special vibes' surrounding my aunt," Hedy explained. "Since then, they've been great friends and Aunt Julia spends a lot of time with her."

Bob just shook his head. "Oh man! Is that woman up to some tricks?"

Hedy shrugged her shoulders. "I wouldn't know. By the way, my aunt is going to see her again today and they're having one of her sessions."

"What kind of session?" asked Bob.

"I don't really know either. The usual stuff I suppose—candles, crystal balls, darkened rooms, palm reading..." Hedy replied. "Anyway, this Madam Zorina said that something evil is going to happen and that Aunt Julia has to take good care of herself."

"And what exactly is this 'evil' supposed to be?" Bob looked doubtfully at Hedy.

"Well, Madam Zorina didn't elaborate on that," Hedy replied.

"Great! That could mean anything. If your aunt should stumble tomorrow, the prediction would also have come true," Bob remarked.

"This is how these people make their money. By not being very precise in their prophecies, there is a wide margin within which they can come true," Jupiter explained.

Pete rolled his eyes. "Jupe, please. Could it possibly be simpler? I mean, I understood you, but do you always have to say it in such a complicated way?"

"Pete, it never hurts to educate yourself and expand your vocabulary," he replied.

"One more thing," Hedy said, "this Madam Zorina does not charge money for these sessions. She calls them a friendly service."

"Is she interested in something else? Jewellery?" Jupiter enquired.

"Not as far as I know."

"I think we will continue to keep an eye on this matter," Jupiter decided. "Maybe we'll find out something about this woman. Maybe your aunt is facing a scam, or maybe this Zorina actually believes these things. We'll see."

Hedy nodded.

After breakfast, The Three Investigators were back at Headquarters.

Pete switched on the radio and the weather report came on: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. In Southern California, excessive heat warning remains in effect for today. Afternoon highs will range from 34 degrees Celsius at the coast, 36 near the bay, and 38 in the inland areas. However for tomorrow, thunderstorms, rain and damaging winds with peak gusts up to 120 km/h are forecast to hit most of Southern California from early morning till mid-afternoon. This will be followed by a breezy and cooler pattern on Saturday which will continue into the middle of next week."

"Fellas, the case is developing," the First Investigator said to open their meeting. "Someone wants to drive Mrs Carlson and Hedy out of the house. I think that's clear by now. In my opinion, now is the time for some far-reaching investigation. Here's what I suggest... Pete, here's the card of that woman who was interested in the house. On the back is her address. It seems that she is staying at a resort—probably temporarily. Go there and see if you can find out anything about her."

The Second Investigator opened his mouth to protest, but then changed his mind. He knew Jupiter would brush aside all his objections, whether they were justified or not. So he decided to save his breath. And actually he was quite happy to get an assignment far away from the Carlson mansion so why provoke a quarrel?

"Bob," Jupiter said, "I want you to try to find out who the mysterious bidder at the auction was. Try to gather as much information about him or her as possible. Maybe your father can help you with that."

"And what are you doing, Jupe?" Bob asked after he had agreed.

"Hedy asked me to take a look at her aunt's new companion. She is suspicious after all that has happened and besides, she finds her aunt a bit 'reckless in her choice of acquaintances', as she put it. I will go to his hotel and have a look around. We'll meet back here at Headquarters at noon."

After Jupiter and Pete had left the trailer, Bob began to dial his father's number at the *Los Angeles Times* office. He knew that his father had some contacts at the auction house and hoped to get the information he was looking for. In a short conversation, he explained his request, and his father promised to take care of the matter right away.

Bob then began to open a file on their new case while waiting for news. Shortly after he had finished and was thinking about what he could do next, the phone rang.

"The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking."

"Cotta here."

"Inspector Cotta! Good morning. Is there any news?"

"Hello Bob. I have the information Jupiter asked me for. Do you have something to write with?" Bob pulled his notepad and a pen out of his pocket.

"I'm ready."

As the inspector reported, Bob became more and more excited. The pen flew across the paper and he could hardly wait to tell his friends the news. After hanging up, he kept glancing nervously at his watch. He decided to go to the archives at his father's office and do some research.

Bob got into his Beetle and rattled off the fastest way to Los Angeles. The roads were busy and his progress was slow. In this weather, everyone seemed to be shifting down a gear.

On his car radio, the news came on: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the news. The annual Golden Raven movie festival begins on Saturday in Los Angeles. The organizers

expect numerous visitors and celebrities from all over the world. Governor Palmer will officially open the spectacle tomorrow night... and the police are warning that traffic congestion is imminent.”

After more than an hour, Bob had finally reached the skyscraper that housed the office of the *Los Angeles Times*.

He took the lift down to one of the two basement floors. Here, in a huge room, was the archives, where all the years of the *Los Angeles Times* were stored, as well as the editors’ files. Many newspapers were bound in thick, large-format volumes, others lay in stacks on the high shelves. The collection was invaluable.

This was the realm of Mrs Grayson, who ran the archives, meticulously recorded the holdings, and had been busy for years having old issues photographed and digitized. As Bob entered, the archivist looked up from her desk and took off her reading glasses.

“Hello, Mrs Grayson,” Bob greeted her.

“Bob Andrews of The Three Investigators!” Mrs Grayson called out. “How nice of you to drop by! How can I help you?”

“Mrs Grayson, do you happen to know the old Colonial-style mansion located just outside Sheldon Forest? The house was left vacant twenty-seven years ago until the last owner by the name of Gerald L. Carroll bought it nine years ago. He lived there until his death last year. The mansion was recently auctioned off.”

Mrs Grayson strolled over to the coffee machine and poured herself a cup of coffee. “I think I know which mansion you mean. I’ve seen it before. It’s a nasty building. Looking for anything in particular?”

Bob shook his head. “I just wanted to get some basic information.”

“So where do you want to start?” Mrs Grayson asked.

“Perhaps twenty-seven years ago when the house was left vacant,” Bob replied. “I can it narrowed down to the month.”

“Yes, I have the microfilms of that year,” the archivist said with a smile.

Bob suspected that was exactly what was in store for him. He would have to use the big, old-fashioned-looking microfilm reader to read those reports.

Mrs Grayson led him to a shelf where there were numerous small boxes. In each box was a reel of microfilm with about two months of the *Los Angeles Times*. She handed Bob two boxes and led him through a fire door into the next room where the readers were.

Mrs Grayson switched on the clunky device. Bob sat down, slid the spool onto the left axle and threaded the beginning of the microfilm through the machine’s gears. Mrs Grayson patted Bob on the back and wished him good luck.

“I have to be systematic,” Bob said to himself. “If there were any news about the mansion, it had to be on the local section of Rocky Beach.” This actually made the search much easier and he soon found what he was looking for.

After Bob had written down everything important, which was not much and hardly new, and had some newspaper articles and photos printed out, he went to Mrs Grayson again.

“Well, Bob, are you any further along with your case?” the archivist asked.

“I’ve got some new information and I’d like to have another look around. Do the names William and Margot Carr mean anything to you? They were both actors.” The archivist leaned against the work table and seemed to be thinking.

“What were the names again?”

“William and Margot Carr.”

Suddenly, life seemed to come to the elderly lady. She carefully put down her coffee mug and hurried to the filing cabinets. After thinking for a moment and then searching for a while,

she pulled out another set of reels of microfilm and handed them to Bob. Bob took them curiously.

"I knew the names meant something to me, I don't forget names easily. My sister told me about it at the time. She lives on the East Coast and has been following the case. You should be interested in this," Mrs Grayson said, grabbing her cup again.

Bob inserted the first reel and looked through issue after issue until he finally came across the article he was looking for. The archivist had not exaggerated. Pete and Jupiter would pop their eyes when they found out, thought Bob. Excitedly, he began to take notes. When he had finished, he carefully rewound the reels and took them to Mrs Grayson.

"You were right," Bob said. "That was very helpful. You are priceless. Thank you very much."

On his way out, he decided to go look for his father to see if he had any news yet. He took the lift up and a short time later, he was standing in front of his father's open office door.

His father sat behind his desk, and was in the middle of a conversation with an editor. Mr Andrews quickly handed his son the notes he had taken and Bob left the newspaper building while skimming the notes. He was not sure how this fitted in with his research and whether it had anything to do with their case at all.

9. Checking on Two Suspects

In the meantime, Pete had reached Seagull Rocks Resort, the place stated on Mrs Fielding's card. This resort was a popular destination for tourists. Here, one could rent luxury and fully self-contained beach-front lodges—all with an outdoor dining area and a gas barbecue for cooking. In good weather, one had a wonderful view of the ocean, the offshore islands and the ships passing by. About a hundred metres away was Seagull Rocks, famous for its sand and rock-lined beach set against a backdrop of steep cliffs.

Pete steered his car into the car park next to the administration building. From inside his car, he looked around the front of the building, and peered inside the lobby through the huge glass door. At the reception desk, a young man in a dark red uniform was typing something into a computer, otherwise, the lobby was empty.

Pete got out of the car, walked near to the glass door to take a closer look inside, making sure that the receptionist did not see him. No guests were sitting in the burgundy armchairs in front of the fireplace and the newspaper stand next to the reception desk lay deserted. At the other end of the lobby, a glass door on the left led into the resort grounds, and the one on the right, which was open, led to the dining room.

Pete followed a path past the side of the building to the back. Hidden by hibiscus hedges, he found a swimming pool, but nobody was there in the oppressive heat. The individual lodges were spread across the area. The only door of the terrace led back into the lobby and Pete quickly realized that he had no way of avoiding the reception if he did not want to spend the afternoon searching aimlessly.

For a moment, he stood indecisively in front of the back entrance and thought. He asked himself how Jupiter would now proceed in his place. Finally he had an idea. He drove back out to a petrol station that he had seen on the way here and bought a book. After having it wrapped, he wrote something on the wrapper. Then he returned to the resort and entered the lobby.

Pete hesitated for a moment and then walked briskly to the reception desk. The receptionist, a tall and blond young man in his mid-twenties, looked up. On a small sign pinned to his lapel was the name 'M. Nichols'.

"Excuse me," Pete said.

"Yes?"

Pete blushed and cleared his throat. He lifted the parcel he had brought and pretended to read off a card. "I have a parcel to deliver to Mrs Elisabeth Fielding. Is the lady in?"

The receptionist seemed surprised.

"Mrs Fielding? I'm pretty sure we don't have a guest of that name here."

Now it was Pete's turn to look surprised. "But we were definitely told about this resort. Mrs Elisabeth Margrete Fielding." Quickly, the young man entered something into the computer and waited for the result. The computer beeped and Nichols nodded.

"Ah, there is something here. The lady doesn't stay here, but she has asked us to take messages for her. So you can leave the package here."

The Second Investigator hesitated. A number of questions troubled him. What should he do now? Why had Mrs Fielding given this resort as her address if she did not live here at all?

Why did she let the resort take messages for her? Where did she really live? And why hadn't she given her real address?

Pete looked at the receptionist's outstretched hand and stepped indecisively from one leg to the other. He wished Jupiter were here. He thought about how his friend would have coaxed information out of the man. He straightened up. "I'm not sure I'm authorized to do that. I'm supposed to deliver this package to her personally. Has Mrs Fielding moved out? Or perhaps she had left a forwarding address?"

Nichols seemed caught off guard for a moment and then had to smile. He entered something into the computer again and then shook his head. "No, she never rented a lodge in this resort and there's no other information on her—only that we are to take messages."

Another dead end. Pete thought feverishly, but he could think of no more ways to get information. Finally, he handed the package across the table and said goodbye, disappointed. The receptionist stowed it away behind him on a shelf.

Outside the entrance, Pete turned and walked towards the beach to think. He grinned at the thought of Mrs Fielding opening the package and finding a Los Angeles travel guide inside. But the laughter quickly faded when he realized that the trail was lost here. How were they supposed to find out anything about this woman now?

Disappointed, he shuffled his feet in the sand. It annoyed him that his mission had ended so quickly. The only possibility was to watch the resort and wait until Mrs Fielding came by... but he could not lurk here day and night.

The sun was shining and the sand in front of Pete glistened and stretched into the distance as a shiny ribbon. Pete shielded his eyes with one hand and when he lifted his gaze, he decided to go back to his car.

When he was about to reach the administration building, he noticed a car parked across the road, about 40 metres from the entrance. The car, a dark blue Dodge, caught Pete's eye because there were no other buildings in the immediate vicinity, only the petrol station, but no other residential building or anything like that.

The Second Investigator recalled that when he first arrived, the car was not there yet. Cautiously, Pete looked around, but no one was there as far as he could see. A dark blue Dodge? Could it be the same car driven by the intruder at the Carlson mansion? If not, that would be a strange coincidence. The athletic investigator strolled a little way from the resort, sprinted across the road and then crept up behind the car.

When he was close enough to make out the licence plate, he noticed the sticker of a car rental agency on the rear bumper. He quickly memorized the name of the agency and the licence plate number. Anxiously, he again looked around the car and there was no one. Then he looked inside the car through the passenger window. On the passenger seat was a map of Rocky Beach and the surrounding area and on the floor were piles of food wrappers from a takeaway restaurant and empty coffee cups.

Pete pulled at the door handle and was surprised to find that it was not locked. After another check, he pulled the door open and reached into the side compartments. After finding nothing of interest there, he opened the glove box. He saw a flashlight, tissues, a pack of chewing gum and a rental contract. Quickly, Pete reached for the paper and was about to skim it when he heard a commotion at the resort's main entrance.

Quickly he closed the glove box and the car door and hid himself behind some bushes. He stuffed the rental contract into his back pocket. Just in time, because at the same moment, a dark-haired man came storming out of the resort and ran to the Dodge. He was carrying Pete's package in his hand! Behind the man, the angry receptionist ran and shouted something after him, but he was too late. The thief had already reached the Dodge and was

driving away with the engine howling. With his mouth open, Pete stared after the car speeding away. Nichols came to a stop next to Pete and took a deep breath.

“Bad news, kid. That guy stole your package.” Sullenly, he looked in the direction of the car, which had long since disappeared. He shook his head and turned to Pete. “Must have been something important in it!”

The Second Investigator was still speechless. He had identified the man as the intruder he saw outside the Carlson mansion. Not that he still had any doubts, as he also recognized the car, but he was wondering what the guy was doing here.

“No, actually the contents were not valuable. Honestly, I have no idea what he wants with it.” Pete decided to ask the receptionist some questions. Jupiter would certainly be interested in this development.

“What actually happened? Can you tell me everything in order?”

The young man looked at Pete suspiciously. “I have to go back to the reception. If you want to know anything, you’ll have to come in with me.” With that he turned and walked towards the resort entrance. Pete followed him.

At the reception, Nichols resumed his place and Pete leaned against the counter opposite him.

“I have to call the police and make a report,” Nichols said. “It would be good if you could wait to talk to them too.”

Pete thought about it. Calling the police seemed unnecessary to him. Besides, he was not very eager to explain his bluff. “Maybe that’s not necessary, sir.” He took out their business card and handed it to the receptionist. He read it carefully.

Despite his annoyance, he grinned at Pete “And what is this supposed to be?”

The Second Investigator straightened up. “My two friends and I are investigators. We are covering a case and we are looking for Mrs Fielding to ask her some questions.” Pete was satisfied. True, his rhetorical skills are nowhere compared to Jupiter, but he did his best.

Nichols was still smiling. “Sounds like you are really serious about this.”

Pete nodded. “In our current case, it’s really important that we find Mrs Fielding.”

For a moment, Nichols thought about it, then he seemed to come to a decision. “All right, I want to help you. We’ll leave the police out of it. I’m sure my boss wouldn’t be thrilled to have them here over something as trivial as this. It would only disturb the guests. So, what do you want to know?”

“Firstly, everything you know about Mrs Fielding and secondly, what happened there just now.”

Nichols began to tell. As he was not always on duty there, he could not say much about Mrs Fielding or when she had given the task to the resort. However, he promised to ask his colleagues.

When the conversation turned to the theft, Nichols hesitated and blushed. It turned out that after Pete had left, Nichols had left his post to talk to one of the waitresses in the dining room. Although he was standing in such a way that he had a view of the lobby, it was only of the front entrance, not the reception or the back exit. After a few minutes, he had heard a noise and stepped into the lobby. Just at the moment, a man swung himself over the counter with the parcel in his hand. Nichols had run after him immediately, but he tripped over an armchair and by the time he had picked himself up, the thief had a good head start.

After Nichols had promised to enquire about Elisabeth Fielding, Pete ran excitedly to his car and hurried to get back to Headquarters. This was interesting news and he was dying to tell his friends.

Hedy had found out which hotel Alexei Swarnoff was staying at. Normally, Jupiter would have ridden his bike there, but because of the sweltering heat, he opted to take a bus.

The Hotel Ocean View was in the city, without a sea view, and it was busy. After looking around the lobby, the First Investigator waited. When several people crowded the reception desk, he joined them as well. He cleared his throat and tried to attract the attention of the receptionist.

The woman, in her mid-forties and with grey, carefully coiffed hair, looked at him through her glasses. "Can I help you?"

Jupiter let his face go slack to give the impression that he was not very clever. "I am looking for my uncle Alexei. He told that he was here in this hotel. I just wanted to visit him for a moment."

"Does your uncle have a last name too?"

Jupiter grinned fatuously. "Oh, yes, of course. His name is Swarnoff."

After typing something into her computer, the lady nodded and reached for the telephone.

"Who should I say is visiting him?"

The First Investigator looked saddened. "Actually, I wanted to surprise him, you know... because I live in San Francisco and I just happened to be here, so I thought I could surprise him."

In the meantime, a couple next to Jupiter was already getting impatient, and the phone also rang. The receptionist eyed him sharply once more and seemed to come to the conclusion that no problems were to be expected from Jupiter.

"First floor, Room 104." Then she turned away from him, back to her work.

Jupiter went to the stairs. On the first floor, he looked for the room, then glanced around the short corridor. Diagonally opposite was a storeroom whose door was not locked. Jupiter looked around again and then slipped inside. He left the door slightly open and watched Swarnoff's room. He was already settling in for a long wait when the door opened and Swarnoff stepped out of the room. He closed the door behind him, looked around the corridor briefly and then walked towards the stairs.

Jupiter thought about it. Hopefully the receptionist was still busy so that she didn't notice Swarnoff leaving the hotel without his nephew. He slipped out of the storeroom, went up to the door, looked at the lock, and took out one of Pete's lock picks. He fumbled with the lock for a moment as he was not as conversant as Pete in picking locks.

Finally, he did it and went in. He quickly locked the door behind him and his gaze briefly roamed the room. Everything was carefully tidied, no clothes, papers or the like were lying around. He began to search the cupboards systematically. In a chest of drawers, hidden under shirts, he discovered a gun and a box of cartridges, otherwise Jupiter found nothing of interest—no identity papers, letters or documentation.

The First Investigator stood in the middle of the room and looked around once more to see if there was anything else. Suddenly, he heard footsteps in the corridor. They stopped in front of the door and the First Investigator could hear the person outside take out a key. Panicked, Jupiter looked around. He couldn't know what the person wanted, so the wardrobe was ruled out. In one leap, he was at the bed. With difficulty, the sturdy boy squeezed himself underneath. Amidst dust fluff and an old sock, Jupiter listened breathlessly.

The door opened and someone entered the room. Heavy footsteps came to the bed and walked past it to the chest of drawers. Carefully, Jupiter lifted a piece of the sheet aside and peered out from under the bed. Directly in front of him he saw a pair of well-kept, black men's shoes. Jupiter hardly dared to breathe, even then, dust tickled his nose. If he had to sneeze now, he would be in tremendous trouble.

After a few minutes, the man left the room. Jupiter waited a moment longer and then crawled out from under the bed, groaning. He went to the door and listened. Satisfied, he slipped out of the room.

The First Investigator went to the stairs and was about to go down when he heard the receptionist's voice from downstairs.

"Have you met your nephew, Mr Swarnoff?"

"My nephew?" Swarnoff sounded irritated.

"Yes, there was a boy here just now. He said he was your nephew who came from San Francisco. I let him go up," she replied.

Jupiter realized that he would not be able to walk out of the hotel so easily. He could already hear them both coming towards the stairs. Quickly and as quietly as possible, Jupiter ran back to the storeroom and hid.

Through the gap, he could watch Swarnoff enter his room, followed by the receptionist. When both had disappeared into the room, Jupiter left the storeroom and hurried down the stairs. He ran past the deserted reception desk, onto the street and to the bus stop.

10. The Ghost Comes Back

“You won’t believe what I found.” Bob stormed into Headquarters excitedly and was taken aback when he saw the faces of his friends. Both were flushed with excitement and each seemed to want to burst out with some news.

Jupiter finally calmed them down. “All right Bob, you start.”

Bob sat down at the desk and pulled out his notes. “After you two had left, I called my father to get in touch with his contacts at the auction house. He promised me to take care of it right away. Shortly after that, Inspector Cotta called and gave me some interesting news. After that, I went to the *Los Angeles Times* archives and checked on the mansion and the people associated with it.

“I’ve been reading up on the mansion and its owners. Hedy had already told us most of it, but I found out a bit more. Max Edgar Ballantyne came to America in 1890. He had inherited a small fortune from his father and wanted to settle down here in Rocky Beach. In 1897, he built the mansion. At the time of Prohibition, he was probably involved in illegal alcohol business. However, he was never caught. At the end of the 1930s, he retired from business life. When he died in 1954, his son took over the house till he himself died twenty-seven years ago. As Hedy already mentioned, the house then remained empty until Gerald L. Carroll bought it nine years ago. I have been unable to find anything about Carroll except for a short article reporting on the recent auction.

“However, Jupe,” Bob continued, “you had asked Cotta to find out if there was anything about Gerald Carroll. He did indeed find something. First of all, Carroll was an actor and he went with a stage name of Ronald Margolis.”

Jupiter blinked in surprise while Pete listened on curiously.

“The troupe he was in was involved in a scandal,” Bob said. “Apparently two other members, married couple William and Margot Carr, had taken advantage of the tour in the East Coast to carry out some gold thefts.” Bob then spread out the printouts of some newspaper articles he got from the *Los Angeles Times* archives.

“According to Inspector Cotta, the two were caught and convicted, but the loot was never found. The two remained silent and were sentenced to thirteen years in prison. No one else from the ensemble could be linked to the robberies. The tour was cancelled and the troupe disbanded. Shortly after that, Carroll came to Rocky Beach under his birth name and bought the mansion where Hedy and her aunt now live. Last year, he died in a car accident.”

Pete put the newspaper article he had skimmed back on the table. “But why did he change his name?”

Bob continued to leaf through his notes. “He didn’t change it at all. He just dropped his stage name and went back to his real name. That’s not unusual.”

“Maybe not,” Jupiter said thoughtfully. He looked at a newspaper article that had an enlarged photo of the hall of the mansion. The picture was grainy, but he could still make out all the details—the dark tiles, the oversized chandelier, and the archway. He pondered while his colleagues watched him attentively.

“Do you think those robberies have something to do with our case?” Pete interrupted the silence.

"I don't know," Jupiter answered him. "But I find it interesting, at least. But it may still prove to be completely irrelevant later... Bob, was your father able to find out who the anonymous bidder was?"

Bob shook his head in disappointment. "His contact could only tell him that it was a man. He didn't know a name."

"A man, then." The First Investigator pinched his lower lip—a sure sign that he was thinking hard. "So that rules out Mrs Fielding. It would be interesting to know if there is also a Mr Fielding. Can you tell us anything about that, Pete?"

Pete began to tell his story—about his ruse with the parcel; how he found out that Mrs Fielding did not rent a lodge in the resort; and about the theft of the parcel. When he reported that the valuable contents of the parcel was a travel guide, his friends grinned.

Suddenly, the Second Investigator hit his forehead with the flat of his hand. Then he pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his back trouser pocket.

"I forgot all about this in the excitement. I pocketed the car rental contract." He put the sheet of paper on the table and smoothed it out. Excitedly, the three boys bent over the contract.

"Alan Goringe, New York," Jupiter read aloud. "So we know the name of our mysterious intruder and thief. We are now left with the question of how he is involved in this affair and why he stole the package."

"Could he be the anonymous bidder?" asked Bob.

Jupiter nodded hesitantly. "That would certainly be within the realm of possibility. So we have some gold thefts that took place thirteen years ago. The perpetrators are in prison and the loot has gone missing to this day. A colleague of theirs moves to the West Coast. There were three attempts to buy the house—the anonymous bidder, the offer through the real estate agent, and Mrs Fielding. Another stranger, who we now know is called Alan Goringe and comes from New York, is watching the house—and not only the house, but most likely us as well."

"You mean he's watching us as well?" Pete asked.

"Of course, Pete," cried Bob. "The package! He was following you, otherwise why would he be at that resort?"

"Exactly!" Jupiter nodded approvingly. "I am now firmly convinced that there is something in the house that someone is looking for."

"But what? And above all, where?" Pete reached for the newspaper article and looked at the picture of the hall. "We've searched everywhere and found nothing."

"Then maybe we didn't look hard enough," Jupiter said.

"So Jupe, what did you actually find out during your visit to Swarnoff?" Bob wanted to know.

The First Investigator shivered when he thought about his experience in the hotel room. He briefly recounted his experiences at the Hotel Ocean View and then brooded silently for a while.

Suddenly, Bob's gaze fell on the calendar above the table. He stared at it as if spellbound, which his two friends also noticed.

"What's wrong?" Jupe asked.

"I just noticed something else entirely!"

"What?" Pete asked.

"The calendar, Pete! Today is Thursday the 12th!"

The Second Investigator sat bolt upright and looked at Bob with feigned bewilderment. "Razor-sharp observation, Bob!"

“Yeah... well no... I mean... tomorrow is Friday—Friday the 13th!”

“What are you getting at?” Jupiter suspected that Bob must have discovered some important detail.

“Nothing!” Bob added amusedly. “It gets really absurd with a walking statue and the thumping noises.”

“I need to hear that thumping again.” Jupiter mumbled as he pinched his lower lip.

“Well, I could do without it. Thank you very much!” The Second Investigator shook his head.

“No, to find out how the thumping originates, we have to hear it again. And this time, we have to be prepared.”

“And how will you prepare yourself for noises that suddenly come on?”

“Pete,” Jupiter groaned. “By being prepared, of course, I meant armed. We need a tape recorder, for example. We also need to follow the noise. If we have located the place where the thumping originates, we may also find out how it was created. Furthermore, I am firmly convinced that someone wants to drive Hedy and her aunt out of the house. We have not been able to find any secret passages or rooms in the house, still, there must be something there that someone wants desperately. Why else would someone make the noises and why else would so many people want to buy the house?”

The First Investigator looked at his colleagues. Bob nodded. Pete was defiantly silent.

“But if the thing that they are looking for is not hidden in the house, where else?” Jupiter asked.

“Around the house?” Bob suggested.

“Right, Bob. I think it would be advisable for two of us to search the property, while the third try again to locate the source of the noises. Since the property is relatively large, Bob and I will search the grounds and you, Pete, take up position in the house with Hedy.”

Bob agreed with the First Investigator’s suggestion. Pete nodded, although he would rather walk for hours through meadows and woods than wait for a haunting in the eerie mansion. Anyway, he would be with someone who was familiar with the place.

At that moment, the phone rang. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker and then answered the call: “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Hedy here.” The girl’s voice sounded distraught. “Can you come here as soon as possible?”

“We were just about to leave. Has something happened?”

For a moment, there was silence on the line. “I think the ghost came back!”

“The ghost? The same apparition Pete saw last night?”

“No, not exactly. I’m not sure. I’ll explain everything when you get here, all right?”

“Okay, we’ll leave right away!” Excited, Jupiter hung up and said: “You heard her, let’s —”

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed unmistakably across the salvage yard. “Pete! Bob! Come out now!”

Jupe groaned. “Not now! That’s gotta be work for us.”

“What?” Pete exclaimed. “You got to be joking—in this weather? How about we get out through Green Gate One now and run away? This is not the time for work!”

“I’m certain she has some sort of work for us,” Jupe said. “Where’s your car, Pete?”

“Conveniently parked just outside Green Gate One,” Pete replied.

“All right,” Jupiter decided. “I guess we have no choice. I’ll make it up to Aunt Mathilda some other day.”

Immediately, Jupiter opened a hidden trapdoor on the trailer floor revealing Tunnel Two—a secret passage leading from the trailer out to his open-air workshop. The three of them crawled along the tunnel and got out at the workshop which was located next to the fence of the salvage yard. Pete activated a secret mechanism which threw open several boards of the fence. This was Green Gate One. One by one, they crept out to the street, got into Pete's MG and set off.

11. The Crypt

Very soon, The Three Investigators arrived at the Carlson mansion. Hedy and her aunt were at the verandah, and the three boys sat down with them.

"Hedy, you should tell us what happened," Jupiter urged her.

The girl looked at her aunt, who was nervously kneading her hands, and nodded. "So, when Aunt Julia came home late this morning, we decided to go out for lunch. On the way to the restaurant, Aunt Julia remembered that she had forgotten her handbag and we had to turn back. As we entered the house, we heard footsteps coming from the kitchen and the basement door slamming. I thought the guy from last night had returned and ran after him. I went down to the basement, armed with a vase." Hedy faltered. "I searched the whole place and Aunt Julia was guarding the basement door, but there was nobody there."

The girl looked defiantly at the boys.

"But how could the guy just disappear from the basement like that?" Bob asked. "We searched the whole place and couldn't find a secret passage."

"Then we must have missed something," Jupiter straightened up.

"I don't understand," Mrs Carlson spoke up. "I don't understand what's going on. Maybe I really should sell this place. Madam Zorina also thinks that evil rules in this house. She warned me and advised me to sell the house as soon as possible. By the way, I have asked her to come. She will be here in about half an hour."

Mrs Carlson disappeared into the house to lie down for a while.

"Hmm..." Jupiter thought. "Maybe we should be around when this Madam Zorina comes."

Hedy and The Three Investigators then remain seated at the verandah to await the arrival of the mysterious Madam Zorina. Jupiter was still very silent and pondered the case. After a few failures, Hedy gave up trying to start a conversation and waited silently.

After about half an hour, a taxi drove up the driveway and stopped in front of the main entrance. A middle-aged woman got out of the car.

Hedy nodded in her direction. "That's her, Madam Zorina."

The fortune teller was wearing a wide, colourfully patterned, caftan-like dress and her dark hair was coiffed into a loose knot. Hedy rose and walked towards the door from which Mrs Carlson had just emerged. The Three Investigators remained in the background, quietly observing.

After a brief greeting, the fortune teller entered the house. Jupiter followed behind. He had asked his two friends to remain at the verandah so as not to have too many people in the house.

As soon as Madam Zorina walked into the hall, a shudder ran through her body. She stopped in the middle and closed her eyes. Aunt Julia waited a few steps behind her, kneading her hands restlessly. Jupiter and Hedy stood by the wall and did not take their eyes off the fortune teller.

In a soft monotone voice, Madam Zorina began to speak. "I sense something ominous... something evil... It's too weak yet, but it's getting stronger." Slowly she opened her eyes and

looked directly at Hedy and Jupiter. The First Investigator felt as if her dark eyes were burning into his soul, as if her intense gaze could illuminate his innermost being.

Then the fortune teller turned abruptly to Mrs Carlson. "Julia, I have warned you before that something bad is going to happen and I am warning you again. I can feel it very clearly... here in this house. It scares me."

Suddenly Madam Zorina dropped her shoulders and covered her eyes with one hand. "I would like to leave now, please."

With these words, she leaned briefly on Hedy's aunt and then walked out, back to the waiting taxi and left almost immediately.

Jupiter rejoined his two friends and briefly described what had happened in the house. Shortly later, Hedy came out. "My aunt has gone back to her room to rest. She is exhausted... and confused."

"I wonder if someone is paying this Madam Zorina for it," Jupe said. "She doesn't want money from your aunt, but calls it a friendly service. Why? Self-interest or was she engaged by a third party? And who could this third party be? Someone we already know or someone we don't yet know? These are the questions we have to unravel next."

"Maybe we really should move out," Hedy mumbled, rolling her eyes.

"I think that's exactly what someone wants you to do," Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "If my theory is correct, these incidents are only aimed at driving you both out of the house. There must be something in this house that is of interest to someone."

Jupiter thought for a while and then said: "We have a lot planned for today, but we will adapt our plans to the new circumstances. Bob and I will thoroughly search the grounds and Pete and you will take another look at the basement. There must be an exit."

Without wasting any more time, Pete went into the house with Hedy while Jupe and Bob began to search the approximately one hectare of land behind the house.

The area was partly wooded and stretched a little way up the slope. It was hot and Jupe and Bob were sweating profusely.

After they had already walked the terrain for an hour without finding anything worth mentioning, the two investigators entered a clearing. Sunlight filtered through the gap in the trees and illuminated a small building in the middle of the clearing like a spotlight. The building was about three metres by three metres and two metres fifty high. It had a pointed roof with a cross on top. Two columns flanked the entrance, and there were no windows all round.

"It's a crypt," Jupe had lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Exactly what I wished to find here," Bob replied. He looked around him and shuddered. As Jupiter walked towards the door, he followed him.

"According to the inscription, Maximilian Edgar Ballantyne and Lydia Sarah Gowan Ballantyne—probably his wife—are buried here," Jupiter read off a plaque fixed on the door. He shook the door, but it did not give way. "Locked. Too bad."

"You're not serious, are you?" Bob wondered. "Are you thinking of going in there?"

"I would want to examine everything closely," Jupiter said and Bob went round the crypt.

"Bob!" Jupiter's alarmed voice caused Bob to quickly go back.

"What is it?" he asked.

Jupe looked down at the ground in surprise.

"What's wrong?" Bob asked again.

Silently, the First Investigator pointed to the ground by the door. Half a footprint was visible on the step. The second half was covered by the door. "Someone was here recently and somehow managed to enter the crypt," he said.

"But who would want to break into a crypt and, more importantly, why?" Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I think this will be of great interest," Jupiter remarked.

"Yes, I'd bet." Bob turned away sullenly.

Jupe was about to follow his colleague when he stumbled. He put his ear to the door and listened. Bob turned around and was about to impatiently ask Jupe to hurry up when he saw him crouching at the door.

"What's wrong?"

Jupe looked at his friend in disbelief. "There's someone in there. I can hear noises."

Meanwhile, Pete, together with Hedy, had thoroughly checked the main room of the basement, but without any results. Now they both stood in the wine cellar and looked around. Pete was examining the shelves, but nowhere was the dust so smudged that it suggested someone had tampered on it.

The Second Investigator and Hedy scanned all the walls and the floor again, but they could find nothing but dust and dirt. All that was left was the room with the furnace. The furnace itself took up almost the entire room. Hedy squeezed herself into the spaces, but when she emerged dusty again, she just shook her head sullenly. Pete stared ahead.

"Let's go back up. There's nothing to find here after all. Besides, I'm all dusty." Hedy brushed the dust off her clothes and it made her coughed.

Pete did not seem to hear her. His mind was working feverishly. There had to be a way out of this basement. No one could just vanish into thin air. He followed Hedy slowly, but when they reached the stairs, he slapped his forehead with the flat of his hand. "I think there might be something we missed!"

He left the stunned Hedy standing there and ran back into the room with the furnace. Hedy, close behind him, stopped in surprise when she saw the Second Investigator tampering with the furnace. He opened the hatch and peered inside.

The interior was so large that two grown people could stand upright in it. Pete pulled his head back in and grinned at Hedy. "This was the only place we didn't look. I assume that the intruder hid here until you went back up, and then he left the house."

Hedy shook her head. "When I called you guys, I kept my eyes on the basement door. All the other exits were still locked. Afterwards I sat at the verandah with my aunt."

"That means the guy is still in the house... or he has left by now. He should have had enough time to do so."

Pete glanced once more at the furnace. "Hedy, do you have a flashlight or something similar? I want to take a closer look at this. Maybe I'll find a clue."

After a few minutes, Hedy returned with a flashlight and two candles. Pete grabbed the flashlight and squeezed past the furnace to the back of the room. He carefully shone the light on the wall and the floor. He could make out smudged footprints in the dust on the floor. He smiled. But as he slowly scanned the walls, he could detect no irregularity.

"Did you find anything?" Hedy's voice echoed unnaturally loudly.

"I'm not sure yet."

There was a rustling behind him and he turned around. Hedy just squeezed through the gap and stood next to him. He handed her the flashlight and she shone it on the wall while he

continued to search.

After a few minutes, he came across a bracket embedded in the wall above him on the right. Perhaps there used to be a candlestick there, but it was missing now, Pete thought. Carefully he reached for it and pulled. Almost silently, part of the wall slid aside and Pete looked into a black hole. That was not a bracket, but a lever to open to a secret passage!

“What was that?” Hedy pushed herself next to Pete.

“A secret passage! That’s how our intruder escaped.” Pete climbed into the opening and then helped Hedy, who came up behind him. Together they walked along a musty tunnel. Beams propped up the ceiling at regular intervals, but the two still had to walk over piles of rubble more than once.

After about ten minutes, they reached the end of the tunnel. It narrowed so much that there was only room for Pete in front. Hedy had to stay behind him. In front of them, the tunnel simply ended.

“I wonder if the tunnel collapsed here?” Hedy asked.

Pete shook his head. “No, it looks more like they stopped digging at this point. The tunnel ends here.”

“So it’s a dead end then.” Hedy’s voice sounded disappointed.

“No, I don’t think so either. There is another exit here.” The Second Investigator shone his flashlight all over the place, but there was nothing. There seemed to be no way to get out from here.

Finally, he glanced up at the ceiling and gave a cry of surprise. Hedy followed his gaze and her eyes widened. The ceiling was not made of earth but of stone and there was a narrow opening going straight up. More importantly, they saw the end of a ladder pressed flat on one side of the opening. Pete shone his flashlight up and saw a hatch above the top end of the ladder.

“So this is the way out. The ladder must be connected to the hatch in such a way that it automatically folds up when you close the hatch above.” He turned to Hedy. “Now you climb on my back and try to see how to get the ladder down. Let’s see what happens.”

Pete bent down and Hedy followed his instructions. After looking indecisively at the ladder for a moment, she searched for the mechanism.

At that moment, Pete heard a click and Hedy cried out. Suddenly she swayed and fell off Pete’s back, dragging him to the ground with her. Next to them, the ladder slowly slid to the ground. The hatch opened and they both looked up to an opening.

Pete straightened up and held out his hand to Hedy. One by one they climbed up the ladder and stood in a dark room. When the Second Investigator shone the light around, he discovered two stone coffins in the middle of the room. Hedy sucked in a sharp breath.

“We are in a crypt,” Pete gasped. In the meantime, he had spotted a door in the beam of the flashlight and tried to open it. Slowly but silently, the door slid open and bright light fell in.

Right in front of Pete was the pale and surprised faces of his two fellow investigators.

12. The Insurance Investigator

“Pete! Hedy!” Jupiter exclaimed. After their initial surprise, Juve and Bob started laughing with relief. Pete and Hedy stepped out into the bright sunshine, all dirty and dusty.

“We thought...”

“How did you get here?”

Pete gave a brief account of their discovery in the basement. Bob pointed to the footprint on the door. “That explains how the intruder got in and out of the house.”

Jupiter nodded. “Yes, and that’s probably also how our ghost left the house last night. So, we’ve solved part of the mystery. Let’s go back to the house.”

With these words, Jupiter closed the crypt and marched off. Hedy and the two boys followed him. The First Investigator trudged ahead in silence, brooding to himself. Every now and then, his friends could see him shaking his head.

When they reached the house, they opened the door and entered. In the hall, they heard voices that seemed to come from the kitchen. Hedy led the three there and they found Julia Carlson talking to a stranger.

“Hedy, how nice.” Aunt Julia greeted The Three Investigators and then turned to a man who had stood up. “This is Mr Cameron French. Mr French, my niece Hedy and her friends, Jupiter, Pete and Bob. Mr French is an insurance investigator and he is here on a case.”

The four friends looked at the man in front of them. He was about in his late forties, casually dressed, had dark hair, wore a full beard, and had a slight belly. Smiling amiably, French shook everyone’s hands. “Pleased to meet you. Mrs Carlson has already told me a bit about you.”

“Yes, sir.” Jupiter contorted his face for a moment, then let it go slack. Now he looked slightly dim-witted to adults and no one suspected the genius behind that face. Pete and Bob stifled a grin.

“Let’s sit down again and I’ll tell you what brought me here. Maybe you can help me.” With an affable smile, he pointed to the kitchen table. After everyone had taken a seat, Mr French began to tell his story.

“I was about to tell Mrs Carlson that I am on the trail of a dangerous criminal who has fled here to Rocky Beach. Unfortunately, his trail gets lost here.” As he spoke, he played with a slender, engraved gold ring on his hand.

“Who is he?” asked Hedy with interest.

“He is about in his early forties, about one metre eighty, dark hair, slim and athletic. At the moment he goes by the name of Alan Goringe.”

Pete was puzzled. The mysterious intruder from New York? He glanced at Jupiter, who shook his head imperceptibly. The Second Investigator remained silent.

Aunt Julia wrung her hands excitedly. “What has he done? Do we have to worry about our safety?”

“The man committed some serious thefts in the New York area a few years ago. Most of the loot was insured by the insurance company I work for. I am now hoping that he will lead me to it, which is why I have been on his trail for the last few weeks. He led me this far but

since then, he has disappeared. However, he has taken a conspicuous interest in this house. That's why I'm here. Have you noticed anything unusual lately?"

All eyes turned to Jupiter in silent agreement.

"Th-there was indeed a man fitting the description. He sneaked around the house here. But we don't know what he wanted or where he is now." Jupiter shrugged his shoulders fatuously.

For a moment, French looked sharply at the First Investigator, then he smiled again.

"Well, I would be very grateful if you could keep your eyes open and let me know your observations."

Jupiter nodded eagerly. "Of course, sir. We are delighted to be part of such a highly interesting case and very much hope to be able to help you."

The man rose again and handed Mrs Carlson and Jupiter each a card with his name, the name of the insurance company and a mobile phone number. "Please call me if anything comes up."

The Three Investigators, Hedy and Mrs Carlson accompanied Mr French to the front door.

"Be careful, this man is dangerous. He wants to achieve his goal and will stop at nothing to do so." With these words, Mr French said goodbye, got into his car and drove away. Silently the five of them stood on the verandah and looked at the car leaving.

Mrs Carlson shook her head. "The whole thing upsets me too much. I need to lie down for a while. Do you think you can manage on your own?" She turned to her niece.

Hedy nodded. "Of course. Don't worry, Aunt Julia."

The Three Investigators said goodbye to Mrs Carlson.

"Why didn't you tell him about the thumping noises, Juve?" Bob was the first to voice the thought that was on everyone's mind.

"I'm not sure. There's something I don't like about that man." Jupiter remained irritably silent.

"So what do we do now?" Pete asked.

"Let's get back to the real issue..." Jupiter turned to Hedy. "Since you first heard the noises, it has appeared again every day, am I right?"

Hedy nodded.

"The question now is, can the thumping be heard even if no one is in the house?"

"What is this?" Pete asked. "Are we getting philosophical now?"

"What I mean by that is does it only sound when someone is around to hear it?"

Hedy shrugged her shoulders. "How would I know? If I'm not here, I can't hear it. Why?"

"Did the thumping always occur at the same time?"

The girl thought for a moment and then shook her head. "No, it varies—sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening, sometimes at night. Why?"

"If the thumping only occurs when someone is in the house, then that means that whoever is creating it—"

"—Knows when someone is in the house," Bob interrupted him. "Well, of course! So he's watching the house."

"Right Bob," Jupiter said and turned to Hedy. "I am convinced that the thumping was done to frighten you and drive you out of the house... We will now wait until the thumping occurs again and then try to find out where it is coming from. But before that..."—with these words the First Investigator hurried into the house to the telephone. "... Before that, I'll have a short talk with Inspector Cotta."

Jupiter dialled the inspector's number, briefly explained the situation and then asked him to make enquiries about Cameron French and contact them as soon as possible. After hanging up again, he thought for a moment.

"You think French was lying?" asked Hedy.

"I don't know. But I think it makes sense in this case not to believe everything we are told without questioning. I guess we'll have to wait and see what the inspector can tell us."

"I hope we don't have to wait too long," Hedy said.

"He said he would take care of it right away. He will call the insurance company and check. I think we can expect an answer soon."

Silence spread, everyone was lost in thought. After a good ten minutes, the phone rang. Jupiter picked up the handset and Inspector Cotta's voice boomed out of it.

"Jupiter Jones, what sort of thing are you involved in this time?"

"Well sir..." the First Investigator began hesitantly.

"Here's the information you wanted," Cotta interrupted him. "Cameron French actually worked for the insurance company previously as an insurance investigator, though now he has been a private detective for about ten years. He's currently here on the West Coast working on a case."

"Were you also able to find out which case it was?"

"Yes, it's about the thefts committed by Mr and Mrs Carr thirteen years ago." In the background, Jupiter could hear a door being opened. "Uh, just a minute, Jupiter," Cotta said.

Someone seemed to have stepped in because Jupiter heard him say: "There's some new information about the Parker villa, sir. You are needed in the briefing room for a moment."

"Yes, thank you. I'll be right there, Kieran," Cotta replied in a lowered voice, then turned back to the telephone. "So, duty calls and I have to go. Does the information help you?"

"Immensely, sir. Thank you very much."

"What are you working on, Jupiter?"

"Uh..." the First Investigator answered quickly, "we still need to check something out..."

A sigh came through the receiver. Cotta had known Jupiter long enough to realize that he would not get any more information from him now.

"All right," he finally said. "I hope when the matter is concluded, you will fill me in."

"I promise, Inspector!" Relieved, Jupiter hung up.

Bob and Pete looked at their colleague eagerly.

"Well? What did he say?" Bob asked.

"French really worked at the insurance company and he investigated the gold thefts," Jupiter told his friends.

"Worked?" asked Bob.

"Yes, Cameron French quit ten years ago and now works as a private detective," Jupiter said.

"So why did he let us think he was still working on behalf of the insurance company?" Pete looked at the First Investigator, perplexed.

"Maybe he didn't," Jupiter replied. "Maybe the insurance company really did hire him as a private detective because he is familiar with the case."

"Then who is this Alan Goringe that French was talking about?" asked Pete in amazement.

"French told us that the man he is looking for now calls himself Alan Goringe. So this is probably not his real name... but Goringe is from New York."

"That could mean that the Carr couple is out of prison," Bob concluded. "But if Alan Goringe is actually William Carr, what about his wife?"

Jupiter pinched his lower lip and thought hard.

"I doubt she will miss out on her share. And just because we haven't met her yet doesn't mean she's not around here somewhere. Maybe she's just keeping a low profile. I think we now know exactly what we're looking for..."

"... The gold from the thefts?" Pete surmised.

"Exactly. I've had my suspicions for a while and I think we can be pretty sure now. In my opinion, Carroll was either involved in the thefts and had orders to hide the loot, or, after the Carrs were arrested, he snatched it and disappeared with it. Either way, the gold has to be here somewhere."

Pete shook his head in perplexity. "I don't know. We haven't found anything after all. Maybe it's in a safe deposit box. We'll never get to it."

"Or he buried it somewhere on the property," Hedy said. "We'll never find it without clues."

"We'll see. I can't shake the feeling that I've missed something. I literally have the solution in my mind, but I can't figure it out."

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "So if our First Investigator can't come up with it. I have no idea."

"How much time actually passed between the auction and your aunt moving into the house?" Jupiter turned to Hedy.

"About a week."

"Enough time then," Jupe remarked.

"Enough time for what?" Pete asked.

But the First Investigator was silent.

"You know, Jupe, sometimes your secretiveness is really annoying," Pete said. "Why can't you just say out loud what you are thinking?"

Jupiter looked at Pete thoughtfully. "I'm just not one hundred percent sure yet. I have to finish my train of thought first."

While everyone was still standing in the hall pondering over the case, dusk had fallen and plunged everything into a dubious darkness.

Hedy rolled her eyes. "I'm hungry now. I'm going to go to make myself something to eat." With these words, she left them standing there and went into the kitchen.

Given the late hour and the fact that all three had had a long and exciting day, Jupiter decided to spend the night here at the Carlson mansion again. Pete and Bob agreed and made the necessary calls to their parents to inform them.

The Three Investigators then retreated into the guest room where they had spent the previous night. While Pete and Bob took turns to take a bath, Jupiter lay down on the bed and began to pinch his lower lip. In his mind, he went through every aspect of their case again, step by step. Sighing, he had to admit to himself that they had made little progress so far. There was still no real clue that would have led to the solution of the case. On the contrary, the mysterious thumping had been joined by a walking statue and a couple of mysterious persons had entered the stage.

After some time, they heard Hedy go into her room. Very soon, Pete and Bob also got ready for bed. Then, the house was silent. In the darkness of his room, while Pete and Bob

fell asleep very fast, the First Investigator was still up trying to tie the individual threads of the case together.

After an hour or so, Jupiter suddenly sat up abruptly in bed. The room was in darkness. A soft thud sounded from the hall, which increased to a wild pounding. Pete and Bob also woke up. The three of them jumped out of bed. They did not even bother to change their clothes, instead they quickly ran out of the room.

At the top of the staircase, they met Hedy and Mrs Carlson, who was clinging anxiously to her dressing gown.

“Fellas, lets go down and check on the noise!” Jupe instructed.

At the hall, the three of them scrambled to every nook and corner to try to find the source of the noise, but it seemed to wander and sounded from different locations. The First Investigator shook his head. He simply could not find anything that would explain the thumping. Slowly, the pounding died down and only soft scratching of nails on stone could be heard.

The silence weighed heavily on the five of them.

“I think,” whispered Mrs Carlson, “I can’t stand this any longer. Maybe Madam Zorina is right and this house is indeed cursed. Maybe I really should sell it.” Shaking her head, she turned around and slowly walked away.

Hedy hesitated for a moment and glanced at The Three Investigators. Then she followed her aunt. The three of them remained in the hall. Again they looked around calmly, trying to find out how the thumping could have come about.

When Jupe was inspecting the main door, and Pete and Bob were at the windows, a noise made them turned around and take notice. They froze. Something appeared in the archway. Pete was only too familiar with this as it was the walking statue coming back to life!

Slowly, the statue became bigger and walked towards them hissing, but now it had to face the three of them. Nevertheless, the statue’s eyes followed their every move and it held up its sword. The hissing sounded shrill in their ears and made them shiver. With dragging steps, the figure approached and waved the sword at them.

Jupiter’s thoughts raced. This could not be. A ghost contradicted all his notions of logic and reason. Nevertheless, one of the statues in the hall had come to life and was coming towards the three of them!

Closer and closer, Pete could almost feel the sword piercing his skin. The hissing increased into a kind of howl of victory. Bob swallowed, his heart beating hard in his chest.

Intuitively, the three of them separated and crept along the wall in such a way that the walking statue could only focus on one of them. Nevertheless, they all kept their eyes on the statue.

Suddenly they heard a door open upstairs. The statue was distracted and turned to look towards the staircase. Automatically, the three boys sprinted down the hall through the archway and up the stairs.

“What—” Hedy began.

Pete and Bob had reached the top, but Jupiter ran up so awkwardly in the dark that he lost his balance and fell on the final few steps. As he picked himself up again, he looked around. Everything was quiet and peaceful, all the statues seemed to be in place and the one that had walked had disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” Hedy asked.

“One of the statues came to life,” Jupiter said.

Pete gathered his courage and said: “Quick, whoever it was must have disappeared through the secret passage.”

Pete ran into the basement, not paying attention to whether anyone followed him or not. Very quickly, he went behind the furnace and activated the mechanism to the secret passage. Bob and Jupe came up from behind and followed Pete into the opening.

When Pete was in the tunnel, he listened for a moment. He had no light with him and the darkness was almost impenetrable. Dimly, he could see a light in the distance and hear someone scrambling away. He followed the sound, stumbling, but when he reached the end of the tunnel, he just saw the ladder fold up and the hatch close. Bob and Jupe came up from behind.

They figured that by the time they went up through the hatch into the crypt, the intruder would have escaped. For a moment, they stood undecided under the hatch, then Jupe decided to go back. There was no point in waiting here.

Pete led the way back. The path in the darkness was arduous and seemed to drag on endlessly. The three of them kept stumbling and they had to brace themselves against the wall with their hands. After a few minutes, Pete would not even have been able to tell in which direction he was actually walking. He wondered what had happened to Hedy and whether she had even noticed what they were up to. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, they reached the entrance to the tunnel.

In the beam of a flashlight, Hedy appeared. "Well, do you need help?"

Relieved, the three of them climbed out to the furnace to join her.

"Where have you been?" Pete asked.

Hedy grinned and her eyes flashed. "After you raced like a maniac into the basement, I thought it would be good to check at the crypt. So I went through the front door into the woods. Just before I got to the crypt, I bumped into someone. And you'll never guess who that was." Challengingly, she looked at The Three Investigators and said: "Cameron French."

"French? What was he doing there at this hour?" Jupiter asked.

"He said to me that he was watching the house because of Goringe. Then he accompanied me back here and waited until I closed the door. I didn't see the ghost."

Jupiter leaned against the furnace and thought. "So French is watching the house. The question is whether he saw the ghost."

"He didn't mention anything like that," Hedy said.

"This is getting more and more interesting." Jupiter pinched his lower lip. "I think we should give Mr French a call tomorrow and see if he has seen our ghost too. I want to know what he is telling us... or rather, what he might not be telling us."

"Oh well, that's settled then," Hedy remarked.

But the First Investigator just smiled at her victoriously and the three of them went back to their room.

13. Friday the 13th

On Friday morning, a severe storm had hit southwest California with squalls and heavy rain showers. The Californian sky was as cloudy as the mood of The Three Investigators.

At breakfast, Hedy switched on the radio in time for the weather report: "This is Joe Price of Radio KTHI with the weather report. Los Angeles. Severe thunderstorms has pummelled Southern California with damaging winds and heavy rain. Since the morning hours, several parts of the state have been experiencing torrential rain and wind at speeds of up to 130 km/h. A major landslide has occurred near Rocky Beach, causing minor injuries to three people."

Shortly after breakfast, Hedy and The Three Investigators remained in the kitchen. Jupiter was still very silent and pondered the case.

"What exactly are you going to do now?" Bob finally asked.

"I have a plan," Jupiter opened. "After attending a performance by this Madam Zorina yesterday, I have come to the conclusion that her acquaintance with your aunt, Hedy, is no coincidence. Do you know how the two of them met?"

"Do you really think it matters?" Pete asked doubtfully.

"It wouldn't hurt to know," Jupiter replied and motioned for Hedy to tell.

"In short, Madam Zorina saved my aunt." Hedy shrugged and looked defiantly at The Three Investigators.

"Can you be more specific?" asked Bob.

"About a fortnight ago, my aunt was shopping and when she went into the car park, a car came towards her. The driver was going much too fast and probably didn't see her at all. The car almost hit her, but Madam Zorina pulled Aunt Julia aside in time."

Jupiter looked at her thoughtfully. "It's possible that this encounter was planned from the start and she specifically targeted your aunt."

"You mean they might have wanted to hurt her?" replied Hedy, horrified.

"Or it was a coincidence after all and this Madam Zorina simply seized the opportunity," Pete interjected.

"Both are within the realms of possibility, but that's not the point we should be focusing on." Jupiter propped his head on his hands. "My plan is to check on this Madam Zorina. But for that to happen, we would have to ensure that she is out of her house and we have enough time to look around her place."

Pete reflected: "Either we shadow the lady for a while and sneak into her house when she leaves, or we can ask Mrs Carlson to meet with her here. In the second case, Hedy could warn us in time when Madam Zorina leaves."

Jupiter nodded. "Indeed Pete, I think you are right." He turned to Hedy. "Do you think you could persuade your aunt to invite Madam Zorina for another house call today?"

"I can try."

"All right, please take care of it right away," Jupe said. "We will now return to our Headquarters to make preparations. Please call us when everything is settled."

Hedy nodded and The Three Investigators left the mansion in Pete's MG.

“What exactly are you trying to do, Jupe?” asked Pete when they were back in Headquarters.

“I want to find out as much as I can about this fortune teller. Is she an impostor? If so, who is she really? What is she up to? Who might have hired her? We might be able to clarify all these if we take a quiet look in and around her house,” the First Investigator explained.

After a little more than half an hour, Hedy called. Jupiter spoke to her briefly and then hung up.

“Mrs Carlson had arranged a meeting with Madam Zorina at 11 am,” Jupiter repeated the conversation. “At a quarter to eleven, we’ll be at Madam Zorina’s house. As soon as she leaves, we’ll go inside. If anything goes wrong and Madam Zorina should return earlier than expected, Hedy will give us a text message.”

Madam Zorina lived in a small apartment complex on the southern outskirts of Rocky Beach. It was still raining heavily. The Three Investigators decided to wait in the car so Pete parked it facing the apartment entrance.

Madam Zorina had left her house and got into a taxi on time. After waiting a few minutes, The Three Investigators were now standing at her front door.

“Somehow I have the feeling that this case is developing more and more into a pure break-in and search. Houses, hotel rooms, apartments.” Pete lightly rattled the lock pick in the lock.

“As long as I don’t have to hide under a bed again, I have no problem with that at all,” Jupe said.

“I would have paid a lot of money to see how you fit under a bed.” Pete looked to the side and grinned at Bob.

Bob laughed.

“Firstly, I don’t think your presence in that hotel room would have been in any way helpful to my venture there, and secondly, you’d be better off investing your money in more sensible things.”

“Hear, hear!” Pete responded.

“And now focus your energy and attention back on the lock.” Jupiter had barely finished speaking when there was a soft click and Pete opened the door, grinning.

“If His Majesty will now enter...”

Without paying attention to his friend, Jupiter entered the apartment and began to look around. From the main entrance, they walked through a corridor which led to a darkened living room. The Three Investigators looked around attentively.

With the heavy red curtains drawn close, it was difficult to make out the furnishings. When their eyes got used to the darkness, they saw colourfully mixed furniture and decorative material. The furniture was also covered with heavy tablecloths and semi-precious stones, crystals and candles of all sizes and colours were lying and standing everywhere. In the middle of the room was a single table with two chairs.

Bob and Pete had opened the remaining doors in the meantime. On the left side were the bathroom and the kitchen, and on the right, the doors led into two bedrooms.

In one bedroom, scattered all over the floor were about a dozen more books on the subject of fortune telling. Other than that, there was only a double mattress with no bed frame and a telephone. Two large suitcases stood in a corner. Bob opened the first one. Inside were women’s clothes and a folder.

“Look at this,” shouted Bob.

Pete and Jupiter looked over his shoulder into the open folder. Bob had found a collection of photocopied newspaper clippings of the auction and sale of Gerald L. Carroll's house. He was particularly familiar with the reports as they were the same ones he obtained from the *Los Angeles Times* archives.

"Now it should be clear that the intentions of this Madam Zorina are anything but honourable. It seems that this woman has deliberately chosen the role of a fortune teller," Jupiter spoke everyone's thoughts aloud. "What is in the second suitcase?"

Pete opened the second suitcase and whistled through his teeth in surprise. "Men's clothes."

"Uh-oh. Unless our Madam Zorina is leading a secret double life, that means whoever owns these clothes could show up here at any moment," Bob said. "I'm in favour of getting out of here."

Pete agreed with him.

"Have you searched the other room yet?" Jupiter still remained quite calm.

"Yes, but it's completely empty. Seems like no one is using it. Come on Juve," Pete urged. "Let's get out of here."

At the same moment, Pete's mobile phone buzzed. It was a text message.

"It's Hedy," Pete said. "Zorina has left!"

"Already?" Bob remarked. "We've only been here a good twenty minutes. She can't have finished already."

"Never mind. We'd better get out now." Pete opened the front door and urged his friends to follow him.

"Yes, let's go," Jupiter agreed. "But we will watch the house a little longer. I want to know who Madam Zorina is sharing the house with."

A few minutes later, The Three Investigators sat back in Pete's car and waited. After about fifteen minutes, the fortune teller arrived in a taxi and disappeared into the house.

"I would be interested to know why she lives so spartanly," Pete interrupted the silence.

The rain continued to pour and from time to time, Pete switched on the windscreen wipers so that they had a clear view. A silent Jupiter sat on the passenger side, pinching his lower lip.

"Juve, say something. What do you think?" Bob urged him from the back seat.

"Well at least we can assume that Madam Zorina is not a genuine fortune teller and that she is targeting Julia Carlson quite specifically. Otherwise, I think we are close to solving this case."

"Yeah, sure, maybe for you. For me, it's all like a tangle of loose threads without connection," Pete sighed and bent over the steering wheel again to see better. "Guys, look who's coming. There, on the right."

"But that's—" Bob began in surprise.

"—Mr Cameron French, the insurance investigator," Jupiter finished the sentence.

"What's he doing here? Is it a coincidence?" asked Pete.

"I suppose that's possible, but I don't believe it. There must be a reason for him to be here," Jupiter mused.

"Maybe he stays here with Madam Zorina," Bob suspected.

"That would also be possible," Jupiter replied.

"I wonder if he's after the gold himself," Pete pondered. "I mean, maybe he knows where the gold is, or he suspects it and then he hired this Madam Zorina to scare Mrs Carlson."

"It would also fit that Hedy saw him outside the crypt last night. Maybe he was the ghost himself," Bob agreed. "So what do we do now? Do we wait until he comes out again?"

“No, I think we’ll go back to Headquarters and call Hedy,” Jupiter replied.

14. Caught by the Statue

As they entered Headquarters and fought their way out of their well-tied rain jackets, the storm was still raging. The weather forecast had been correct as there were severe thunderstorms and the harbingers could hardly be ignored even inside their headquarters.

"Man, this is one big storm," The Second Investigator remarked.

"At least, after all the heat from the past week, the storm's a good thing after all," Bob said.

"But it could do much damage," sighed Jupiter as he looked suspiciously at a dripping spot on the ceiling. "Look at that leak!"

Annoyed, Bob rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a roll of duct tape. He then climbed onto a chair and frantically tried to seal the small leak in the roof of their trailer.

"Jupe, when are you going to weld a metal sheet on the roof?" he asked. "You've been wanting to do that for a long time."

"Yes, Bob, I know how long this has been on my list." Jupiter puffed. "I'll do it when the rain stops, but now, we better get on with our case."

"Absolutely," Bob replied.

"I have a plan," Jupiter announced. "I think we should set a trap for the culprit."

"And what are you gonna do?" Pete interrupted him as he dropped onto a chair. Bob and Jupiter also sat down.

"Hedy and her aunt will move out of the house," the First Investigator continued unperturbed.

Bob nodded. "Why?"

"We can assume with near certainty that the house is under surveillance by at least one person. Hedy and her aunt should pack a few things and have the observers see them leave the house. They can stay in a hotel," the First Investigator explained. "In the meantime, the three of us will lie in wait at the house. I don't think we'll have to wait long for someone to come."

"Do you think Hedy and her aunt will agree to your plan?"

"We will just have to convince them," Jupiter answered simply.

Suddenly the ringing of the telephone interrupted the First Investigator. Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker before he answered so that his friends could listen in.

"Aunt Julia did not come back." Hedy's voice boomed excitedly from the loudspeaker even before Jupiter could say anything.

"What happened?"

"Just after she arranged with Madam Zorina, she drove out somewhere but she didn't come back in time. Madam Zorina and I waited, but after about half an hour, the fortune teller left. I don't know where Aunt Julia is and I'm beginning to worry. It's just not like her."

"Do you know where she was going?" asked Bob.

"No, she didn't tell me."

"Did you try to call her mobile phone?" Jupiter asked.

"That's the thing. I called, there was a ringing tone, but nobody answered,"

"Maybe she's just been delayed driving home in the heavy rain," Jupiter tried to reassure Hedy. "Shall we come over and wait with you?" he asked.

"No, after all, I am perfectly capable of staying here alone. I'm just worried after everything that's happened."

"Please call us if you hear anything new."

"I will." With that, Hedy hung up.

"Do you think something has happened to Mrs Carlson?" asked Bob.

"I don't know," Jupe replied. "It's strange that she didn't show up for the meeting. However, it's too early to assume the worst right away. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"And what are we going to do about your plan now?" Pete wanted to know.

"I will think about that," Jupiter replied and began to ponder the case again. Where could the gold be hidden? This question gave the First Investigator no peace. Unlike his friends, he was convinced that it was hidden in the house. They had searched everywhere in the house and had been unable to find anything. Jupiter felt he was very close to the solution, but he just couldn't put his hand on it.

Suddenly, the phone rang again. It was Hedy.

"Hello, Jupiter? I now know where Aunt Julia went this morning," Hedy said. "She had a breakfast appointment with that Swarnoff. He just called and asked for Aunt Julia because she didn't show up for the meeting and didn't cancel either,"

"So she was not seen shortly after she left the house," Jupe concluded.

"So it seems," Hedy said. "What if someone abducted her? I think all of this started because of this house. It's brought us nothing but trouble."

The thought of an abduction had already occurred to the First Investigator as well. If there was an abduction or an accident, Hedy would have been informed by now.

"If someone has abducted your aunt, then that someone must have a plan. He wants to get into the house. So the next step would be to drive you out. Okay, I have a plan and I think we should put it into action right away. We will come now."

Jupiter made a short phone call to Inspector Cotta, and they set off in Pete's car to Sheldon Forest.

It was mid-afternoon, and the rain had subsided. The Three Investigators were back with Hedy at the Carlson mansion.

Immediately, Jupiter briefed her on his plan. "Someone wants to drive you out of the house, and we'll make it easy for that person. You move out conspicuously so everyone sees it. Then, when the perpetrators think they have a clear path, they will strike... and we'll be waiting for them here."

"But where is my aunt?" Hedy wanted to know.

"Maybe she met someone—someone involved in this case who wanted her out of the way. I think the person or persons in question have lost patience and they want to strike now. If you move out now, I'm sure someone will come here looking for the gold... and that someone must also know that your aunt is not here... and that should be the abductor."

"I don't know, but isn't that a bit far-fetched?" Hedy asked.

Jupiter gave her a withering look. "I don't think so. I've thought everything through thoroughly." He turned to Pete and Bob. "We'll wait for them here, all right?"

Both nodded.

“Then let’s get started. Hedy, go and pack some things. Pete and I will be waiting for you outside. Bob, you know what you have to do.”

Bob nodded. Hedy went upstairs to her room to pack and Bob disappeared into the back of the house to unlock the door at the conservatory. This would allow The Three Investigators to sneak to the house later and enter unseen. They did not want to use the secret passage so as not to give themselves away.

After about five minutes, Hedy came back outside with a suitcase. Pete took it from her and stowed it in his car’s boot. Jupiter and Hedy then began to talk loudly about Hedy’s imminent departure.

“Do you have everything you want to take with you?”

“Yes, I think so. And your aunt really doesn’t mind me moving in with you temporarily?”

“No, that’s not a problem. She’s quite enthusiastic... but be prepared to help out at the salvage yard. My aunt Mathilda was furious with us for not being around to help storm-proof the yard yesterday.”

Hedy laughed. “No problem.”

Pete slammed the boot lid loudly and turned to the two of them. “I think we should leave now. The sooner I get out of here the better.”

Jupiter agreed. “Where’s Bob? We have to go now,” he said. The three waited another minute, but Bob did not appear.

“I’ll go look for him,” Hedy said and ran into the house. Jupiter stood next to Pete at the car.

“You are really sure that everything will work out?” Pete asked his friend quietly.

“I’m pretty confident that everything will go the way I want it to,” Jupe replied.

Pete mumbled something unintelligible to himself and then both waited in silence. Gradually, the Second Investigator became restless. Where were Bob and Hedy? “There is something wrong,” he sensed.

Jupiter also began to worry. He pushed himself off the bonnet and walked towards the house. Pete followed him. Inside, all was quiet in the hall, and there was no sign of Bob or Hedy anywhere. On the way to the conservatory, Jupiter suddenly hesitated. There was a strange smell in the air.

“That’s—” the First Investigator began, but was interrupted by a rustling noise behind him.

He turned and saw a tall figure standing behind Pete. Jupiter knew the apparition—the eyes piercing the dim light, but this time it did not have a sword... and it did not hiss.

Jupiter was frozen. One arm reached out and held Pete, and the other pressed a cloth tightly over his friend’s mouth and nose. The Second Investigator cried out in surprise and tried to resist. After a moment, he rolled his eyes and his legs gave way. Jupiter reacted quickly. He grabbed a chair and hurled it at the figure. The statue fended off the attack and came after the fleeing Jupiter. Somehow the statue was really quick this time.

The First Investigator ran towards the front door with the eerie apparition breathing down his neck. When Jupiter reached the door, the statue had grabbed him on his shoulder. The First Investigator whirled around and tried to defend himself, but it was too late. A white cloth was pressed against his mouth and nose. He became dizzy, and then finally lost consciousness.

15. Where is Aunt Julia?

Pete awoke slowly. His head ached and his tongue felt as if he had eaten cotton for lunch. He tried to sit up but immediately felt nauseous. Slowly he let himself fall back down and waited for the wave of pain to fade.

Next to him, Pete could hear someone moaning. But nothing was visible in the darkness. He felt that his hands and feet were bound. With difficulty, he tried to remember. He and Jupiter had been waiting by the car for Hedy and Bob. When they didn't come, they had gone back into the house... and then what? Pete could not recall. Everything was dark.

"Bob? Jupe? Are you here?" he called into the darkness.

Again he heard a groan. Then it was quiet again. After a few minutes, Pete could think reasonably clearly. Someone had overpowered them and locked them up. By all appearances, they were in the basement of the Carlson mansion.

"Pete? Jupe?" Bob's voice came through the darkness.

"I'm over here, Bob," the Second Investigator replied. "What happened?"

"I don't really know what happened. I was coming out of the conservatory and heard a noise. After that, I think I passed out." Both were silent. The darkness weighed heavily on them.

"Fellas?"

"Jupe?" cried Pete. "Jupe! What's going on?"

"The statue caught us. I assume he used chloroform to do it. Seems like events have caught up and finally overtaken us," replied the First Investigator.

"I should have known not to expect a clear answer," Pete groaned.

In the meantime, Hedy had also woken up. All of them had been stunned and tied up by the statue.

From upstairs, noise came through the door to The Three Investigators and Hedy. Someone was searching the house and was not being very silent doing it. Suddenly, they heard other noises. Another person had come in and they heard a fierce scuffle for almost a minute. Then it was quiet again.

The First Investigator's voice boomed into the silence. "I'm so stupid!" If Jupiter's hands hadn't been tied behind his back, he would have smacked his forehead.

"Would you please leave us mere mortals out of it." Pete tried to make out Jupiter's face in the darkness. "Why were you so stupid?"

"It's so simple. I know where the gold is now." Triumph resonated in the First Investigator's voice, but also annoyance that it had taken so long for it to set in.

"You know where the gold is hidden?" There was a rustling in a corner as Hedy tried to sit up.

"Of course. It's quite a logical conclusion."

"Then maybe you'd let us in on the secret?" Bob's voice was literally dripping with irony.

"You could easily figure it out for yourselves. You have exactly the same clues as I do."

"Unfortunately, we don't come close to your ingenuity. And to be honest, I'm not in the mood for mental exercises at the moment." Pete struggled audibly with his restraints.

“Pete, remember the photo of the hall we saw and think of the big furnace in the basement.”

“Goodness!” Pete remarked. “Is it really so hard to just tell us what you figured out?”

“It wouldn’t hurt if you—”

Suddenly, footsteps sounded outside the door. Jupiter fell silent. A key rattled softly in the lock, the door creaked open and a figure appeared in the doorway. Illuminated from behind, the four could not make out the face, but they all saw the gun the person held. For a moment, there was dead silence.

“You guys gave me quite a headache.” The man kept the gun pointed at The Three Investigators and Hedy. “But that’s over now.”

Pete shuddered at these words and struggled more and more doggedly with his shackles.

“Mr Goringe, I presume?” Jupiter spoke up.

“How right you are. Clever little fellow... but apparently not smart enough.” Goringe still kept the gun pointed at them.

“Mr Goringe, if you would perhaps be so kind as to free us, then we could exchange ideas and finally bring the case to a solution together,” Jupiter suggested.

The man seemed speechless for a moment, then they could hear him laughing softly.

Goringe then put the gun back in his pocket and pulled out a knife. Pete sucked in a sharp breath, but what he feared did not happen. Goringe freed the four of them from their shackles. Jupiter rubbed his wrists to get the circulation going again and put on a satisfied expression. Together they went up the stairs to the kitchen. There, on the floor, lay an unconscious Alexei Swarnoff with his hands bound behind his back.

“Friends, may I introduce Alan Goringe, the mysterious observer.” Jupiter looked sharply at Mr Goringe. “And also a private detective—”

“—Looking for the Carrs’ gold,” Bob added.

Mr Goringe grinned. “I should have contacted you much earlier. Then the case would probably have been settled by now.”

“It’s never too late,” Jupiter explained coldly. “I suggest that you explain what happened.”

Alan Goringe sat back calmly. He was in his mid-forties, well-toned and athletically dressed. His blue eyes flashed exuberantly and he was still smiling.

“I was watching the house. After you disappeared one after the other and didn’t come back even after half an hour, I was worried. I knew you wanted to leave the house. A bit conspicuous, don’t you think?” The detective still seemed amused.

But Jupiter did not react. He waited silently. His friends were also silent.

“So I thought maybe I should check on you guys... and here I am,” Goringe added with a sweeping arm movement.

“You’re after the gold, aren’t you?” Hedy wanted to know angrily. “Are you also responsible for that disgusting thumping and the walking statue? But more importantly, did you abduct my aunt?”

But the person addressed shook his head seriously. “No, I have nothing to do with any of that.”

“And who is this guy here?” Pete nudged the unconscious Swarnoff lightly with his foot.

“This is Alfred Jackson alias Sergei Nikolai alias Alexei Swarnoff alias umpteen other names. Twice convicted of fraud including marriage fraud. Apparently he’s now switched over and is interested in gold.”

“But how does he know about the gold?” Bob wanted to know.

“He was Carr’s prison-mate. I assume Carr bragged or gave himself away somehow, and that’s how Jackson got here,” Goringe replied.

“Do you have any idea where Mrs Carlson might be?” Jupiter asked but Goringe shook his head.

“Actually, there are not too many possibilities where she could be,” the First Investigator reflected. “She is not at Madam Zorina’s, otherwise we would have found her. That leaves Jackson, but I don’t think he would take the risk of keeping Mrs Carlson a prisoner in his hotel room.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip. “There is one place left...” He paused dramatically.

“Well, well, our First Investigator has a brainwave,” Bob sneered. “I wonder if he’ll share his brilliant thoughts with us.”

Jupiter overheard the teasing. “I think I know where your aunt is, Hedy.”

“Where?”

“Where we probably would never have looked for her—here in the house.”

“How could she have come back here without me noticing anything?” Hedy wondered.

“Of course!” Pete slapped his forehead. “The same person who abducted her knocked us out. Since she is not in the basement with us, the other place would either be the secret passage or the crypt!”

The First Investigator nodded in amusement. “That’s the way it has to be. So we go look for her now, and after that, all we have to do is to expose the perpetrators of this haunting.”

Immediately Pete rushed back into the basement. He didn’t wait for the others who followed behind, but went straight to the furnace and the secret passage behind it.

The First Investigator had been right, as usual. They found Julia Carlson bound and gagged at the end of the tunnel, near the hatch to the crypt.

Hedy freed her aunt and together they helped her back into the kitchen. After a glass of water and wrapped in a blanket, she seemed to feel better and was able to recount what had happened after she had left the house earlier in the day.

“I went to meet Alexei for breakfast in the Los Angeles. I parked in an underground car park, but I don’t remember anything after that... not until I was in that horrible tunnel.” Mrs Carlson shook herself. “It was quite awful—so dark and quiet... terrible.” She shivered.

“All is well now, Aunt Julia. You are safe now. Jupiter knows what is going on and who is responsible. We’ll catch them and then all this will be over,” Hedy comforted her aunt.

All eyes turned to the First Investigator. The latter nodded. “I think it is time to begin the final act in this drama.”

With these words, he went to the phone and made three short phone calls. When he was finished, he grinned at his friends, Mrs Carlson and Mr Goringe.

“Everyone will be here within an hour. The bait is set and the trap is ready to spring.”

16. All Identities Revealed

“I don’t understand what this is about? I thought Mrs Carlson wanted to talk to me about selling the house. Are you also interested in the house?” Elisabeth Fielding turned to Cameron French.

“No. I don’t know what’s going on either,” he replied.

The two sat together with The Three Investigators, Hedy and Inspector Cotta in the drawing room of the Carlson mansion. Jupiter took the floor.

“Mrs Fielding, Mr French, I must admit to having invited you both here under false pretences. I want to tell you,” he continued in a raised voice to drown out the indignant exclamations, “a story.”

French had stood up indignantly. “If that is the reason you asked me here, then I don’t think I’m interested.”

“Believe me, Mr French, you will be interested in what I have to report. I’m convinced I can help you solve your case and catch the culprit.”

Indecisively, the insurance investigator looked at Jupiter and then sat down again. “Very well, let’s get on with it.”

“First of all, I would like to introduce to you Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department,” Jupiter held out his hand towards the inspector. At these words, Mr French and Mrs Fielding turned jerkily towards the policeman.

The First Investigator continued: “You may not be familiar with all the circumstances, so I will start from the beginning. My friends and I are investigators—The Three Investigators—and we specialize in unusual cases. A few days ago, Hedy Carlson came to us to entrust us with a case. Her aunt, Mrs Julia Carlson, purchased this house. Shortly after she moved into it, she experienced haunting events.”

With a forced smile, French leaned back in his chair.

Mrs Fielding shook her head and interrupted Jupiter. “Really I don’t understand what this is all about” she said. “I don’t care if this place is haunted or who you are. I want to buy this house and no ghost story is going to make me change my mind. As Mrs Carlson is not even here, I presume that there is no discussion of a sale, so I might as well leave now.” With these words, she stood up.

“I must ask you to stay a little longer and continue to keep us company, Mrs Fielding.” With the concentrated authority of his position, Inspector Cotta barred the door.

“A little patience, ma’am,” Jupiter said. “You will soon understand, I guarantee it.”

Mrs Fielding shrugged her shoulders in resignation and remained seated. “If you want to keep me here by force...”

The First Investigator ignored that remark and continued: “The ghostly apparition manifested itself in persistent thumping on the walls and in the form of a walking statue, which was seen by us several times. Then we began our investigations. It turned out that not only Mrs Carlson was interested in the house, as there was one other bidder at the final stages of the auction. Shortly after she moved in, she received an offer through a real estate agent. Then you, Mrs Fielding, came forward showing interest in this house...”

“Well, is that a crime?” Mrs Fielding looked challengingly at Jupiter.

“Of course not, but driving the rightful owner out of the house with the help of a haunting is.”

“I resent that.” Indignantly she turned to Cotta. “I do not have to put up with this. I wish to leave at once.”

The inspector smiled. “Just listen to what Jupiter has to say. It will interest you.”

Jupiter nodded. “We will now briefly present our investigations to you. We began checking on the house and its former owners and came across some interesting information.

“The last owner, Gerald L. Carroll, was a member of a travelling acting troupe, and he went with the stage name of Ronald Margolis. Two other members, a married couple named William and Margot Carr were involved in some gold thefts on the East Coast. The couple were arrested, but the gold remained missing. Margolis, or rather Carroll, moved here to the West Coast.”

“But what’s that got to do with my case, boy?” French interrupted. “I don’t know... you boys may be quite capable, but I guess I was too optimistic when I thought you could give me a hand.”

“On the contrary, sir. We know that Carroll made off with the gold.”

French seemed to change his mind and watched Jupiter with interest.

“And,” the First Investigator added triumphantly, “we know where the gold is.”

Suddenly, Mr French got excited: “You know? Where?”

“Let me continue with my report first, sir,” the First Investigator rebuffed. “We had five suspects in the course of our investigation. You, Mr French, were apparently eliminated after we made enquiries with your insurance company. That left you, Mrs Fielding—” Jupiter drowned out the woman’s indignant exclamation. “—A stranger who was watching the house; a new acquaintance of Mrs Carlson’s, a Mr Alexei Swarnoff; and finally, a fortune teller by the name of Madam Zorina.”

Sharp-eyed, Jupiter watched Mr French and Mrs Fielding, who were both shifting uneasily in their seats.

“Can you maybe get straight to the point? I have something else to do than to listen to you.” Mrs Fielding crossed her arms in annoyance.

Jupiter nodded. “I will go straight to the results of our investigations. We found that the stranger who was watching the house called himself ‘Alan Goringe’ and he came from New York. As Mr French informed us, he was also on his trail and we first suspected that Goringe was in fact William Carr. Then we found out that you, Mrs Fielding, were not staying at your resort. Why not?” the First Investigator addressed the lady directly.

“I... I don’t know why that would be any of your business,” she stammered.

“I would advise you to answer that question,” Inspector Cotta spoke up.

Mrs Fielding looked contemptuously at Inspector Cotta. “I don’t think you can ask me to say anything,” she replied coldly.

“Of course!” Inspector Cotta said. “You have a right to remain silent. If you wish to go through the formalities, I could arrange for that.”

“Mrs Fielding?” Jupiter asked.

“I’m staying with a friend. I don’t necessarily have to announce that publicly, do I?” she replied challengingly.

Jupiter nodded. “Of course not... but I believe that you have also rented an apartment and played Madam Zorina for Mrs Carlson, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Mrs Fielding looked coldly at Jupiter.

“Yes, I think you know that very well. By the way, Mr French, you neglected to tell us that you have exchanged your permanent job at the insurance company for a freelance career

in criminology,” Jupiter addressed Mr French.

“Excuse me?” asked French, irritated.

“What Jupiter is trying to tell you is that you didn’t tell us that you quit the insurance company and are now working as a private detective,” Bob explained.

“What?” French exclaimed in irritation.

“You both set up a clever deception to drive Julia and Hedy Carlson out of this house.”

“Boy, really. That’s baseless speculation. What makes you think we are together?”

French laughed nervously.

“One small detail, Mr French, as my colleague Pete Crenshaw noticed. At our first meeting, you were playing with a gold ring. Pete noticed that two masks were engraved on its top, one laughing and one crying—comedy and tragedy—the two genres of drama. Pete remembered that he had seen the same ring on both Mrs Fielding and Madam Zorina. That could not be a coincidence. They’re wedding rings, aren’t they, Mr and Mrs Carr?”

The tension in the room was palpable. All eyes were on the pair of crooks who sat there speechless.

“That... That’s utter nonsense.” Mr French turned uncertainly to Cotta. “You’re not going to believe what this boy is spinning here, are you?”

Jupiter nodded at Pete, who stood up and pushed aside a folding screen that covered off part of the room. Behind it was Alan Goringe, who was holding a bound and gagged Alexei Swarnoff at gunpoint, and Mrs Carlson.

Carr’s face flushed red and when he abruptly jumped up. Inspector Cotta drew his service weapon and gestured for him to sit down. Carr reluctantly complied with the request.

“I think,” Jupiter continued, “you already know each other to some extent... but I will still proceed with an introduction. The gentleman with the gun is Cameron French, the real one, I might add. The gentleman tied up is Alexei Swamoff, better known as Alfred Jackson, marriage swindler, con man, and prison-mate of William Carr, as the real Mr French told us.” The First Investigator made a sweeping hand gesture. “All these people were looking for the gold the Carrs had stolen and then Carroll had disappeared with.”

“But where is the gold?” Bob interrupted him.

“Do you recall the grooves on the concrete floor in the basement and the old photo of the hall from the newspaper.” When his friends nodded, he continued. “Then recall the furnace in the basement and all you have to do is put two and two together.”

Pete, Bob and Hedy pondered.

“What does the photo of the hall have to do with it?” asked Pete resignedly.

“Pete, remember what was on it.”

“Well, the same thing that’s there now.”

“Really?” Jupiter asked.

“No,” Bob suddenly exclaimed. “Jupe is right. The statues were not in the photo!”

“Right, Bob,” the First Investigator confirmed. “I suppose there was equipment in the basement to melt and cast gold, that Carroll eventually removed later. He melted the gold, moulded the statues, covered them with a thin layer of bronze and painted them. I believe that Carroll had plans for the gold but he didn’t realize them because he died in a car accident last year. We had thought that the statues were movie props back when this mansion was used for movie shoots, but that was not the case. They were created by Carroll, and the gold was under our noses the whole time!”

17. Last Questions

Four hours later, The Three Investigators, Hedy and Mrs Carlson were in the kitchen drinking hot tea and trying to sort out the last questions of this case. Earlier, Inspector Cotta had arrested Mr and Mrs Carr and Alfred Jackson, and brought them to the police department. The Three Investigators, Hedy and the real Cameron French had followed along to give their statements. Julia Carlson had stayed back in the house to recuperate from the ordeal.

“So the Carrs put on this ghost story?” Mrs Carlson asked.

“Yes,” Jupiter replied. “The Carrs missed the auction because they were released from prison about a week later. They found out who had won the bid for the house and Mr Carr tried to buy it legally. When that didn’t work, they broke into the house and prepared everything before you moved in, Mrs Carlson.

“Then came the creepy thumping noises. They thought that after a few days of that, you wouldn’t be able to wait to sell the house, so Mrs Fielding conveniently came along with an offer to buy. To hasten the process, they made the ghost appear, inspired by the statues in the hall.”

“At the police department, the Carrs were blaming each other for this case and revealed everything like crazy,” Bob said. “Carr played the walking statue. That’s why last night, Hedy met him outside the crypt after he escaped through the secret passage.”

“Right Bob,” Jupiter agreed.

“But what role did Alexei play?” asked Mrs Carlson.

“Swarnoff, or rather Jackson, learned of the gold by chance. Carr bragged about his coup in prison and Jackson decided to look for the gold himself. He was released a little earlier than Carr and immediately came here to Rocky Beach. He was the anonymous bidder at the auction. He failed but he managed to obtain information about you, the successful bidder.” Jupiter was silent for a moment. He didn’t want to tell Mrs Carlson straight out that Jackson had taken advantage of her.

“In his attempts to get the house and the gold, he was careful not to meet the Carrs because that would blow his cover,” he continued.

“And how did the Carrs create the thumping?” asked Mrs Carlson.

“It was quite cleverly thought out,” Pete explained. “The sound was transmitted through wireless mini speakers. The Carrs placed them in different places and camouflaged them. In other words, they painted the speakers.”

“They transmitted the sound from a small white van outside, which we noticed a couple of times,” Bob spoke up dejectedly. “Unfortunately, we didn’t think anything of it.”

“Well, you couldn’t suspect everything and everyone,” Hedy reassured The Three Investigators.

“We all noticed the van, but since neither of us had considered it important,” Jupiter bit his lips. “Such a mistake must not occur to a good investigator. Every little thing, no matter how seemingly unimportant, can contribute to the solution of the case. We have now learned that painfully.”

“How did the Carrs know about the secret passage?” Mrs Carlson asked.

"They found it by accident when they were looking for the gold in the crypt," Pete explained. "Jackson then found out about it when he was watching the Carrs."

"This was how Jackson entered the house after abducting you, Mrs Carlson. He put you in the tunnel, overpowered us and then locked us in the basement. He was desperate to get ahead of the Carrs and time was running out, so he struck," Jupiter added.

"So he also disguised himself as the statue?" asked the elderly lady.

"Jackson found the costume in the crypt where the Carrs had hidden it," Jupiter explained. "The costume, by the way, was made by Mrs Carr herself. Jackson saw us at the house, and decided to dress up in it. He had chloroform with him because he wanted you, Hedy, out of the way. Then when we arrived, he decided to drug us and lock us up as well."

"That leaves two questions," Mrs Carlson continued. "How did you know that Goringe was the real Cameron French? And why did he come to Rocky Beach under a false name?"

"He told us himself and he explained his fake name as well," Pete replied. "He wanted to pursue the Carrs incognito and that's why he chose that name."

"When we told him that sounded a bit thin, he only replied that it had seemed like a good idea at the time," Bob interrupted him.

"By the way, the whole thing was pointless because Carr happened to see French and asked about him at his hotel. That was how Carr found out that French called himself 'Alan Goringe' and was hot on their heels," Pete added.

"And the fake French?" Mrs Carlson asked. "I mean, after all, the rest of us bought his story. It sounded so real."

"That was quite clever of him," Jupiter explained. "Carr knew who French was, and he assumed that French was still working at the insurance company. He made enquiries and that's when a mistake happened. He was told that French was not there at the moment, but not that he was no longer a permanent employee with the company. In fact, the company engaged him as a freelancer from time to time. So Carr thought French was still an insurance investigator and was currently on assignment here in Rocky Beach.

"Consequently, Carr assumed French's identity, so if anyone were to enquire about Cameron French at the insurance company, they would only be told that he was on the road and couldn't be reached. This was the case and we believed Carr's story. I became suspicious when Inspector Cotta told us that French had quit his job years ago and was now self-employed. The question then was, why hadn't Carr told us this? Simply because he didn't know it himself."

"So the Carrs played many roles in this case," Mrs Carlson presumed.

"As former actors, it was no problem for them," Jupe said. "With the help of Madam Zorina, you were persuaded to sell the house, and conveniently, Mrs Fielding appeared. As Cameron French, Carr then stoked the fear of a dangerous criminal to lead us on a false trail. We were supposed to assume Goringe was Carr. At the same time, he was trying to find out what we already knew." Jupiter leaned back in his chair.

For a while, everyone was silent and lost in thought.

Finally, Hedy broke the silence. "I'm glad this case is finally solved. No more ghostly apparitions, no more thumping noises and the police had already removed those awful statues. At last, we can relax."

Mrs Carlson also nodded. "Yes, I really must be grateful to you boys. You have freed me from the clutches of those horrible criminals. I don't know how to thank you..."

"Your satisfaction is enough thanks for us," Jupiter said, somewhat embarrassed.

18. Back at Jill's Place

It was late morning on the next day, a Saturday. The Three Investigators decided to go back to Jill's Place to celebrate another successful completion of a case.

Together, they set off in Pete's MG to downtown Rocky Beach. At that time, there was an amazing amount of activity. As expected, after the huge downpour the previous day, the temperature had dropped considerably, and the sidewalks were full of people.

Pete parked his car and the three of them went into the restaurant and saw that it was well attended. Almost all tables were taken, but the same table they had sat at a few days ago was still free. The three headed straight for it.

"Three Cocoa Specials, please..." the First Investigator immediately placed their order of drinks with the waitress—an elderly, chubby woman with red cheeks who introduced herself as Annie.

"Three Cocoa Specials coming right up!" Annie wrote the order on a little notepad. She paused for a moment and then said: "Oh, by the way, your drinks are on the house."

"Oh, that's nice!" said Bob. "Why is that?"

"If our Rocky Beach has three investigators who are a lot more skilful compared to the local police, then you have to give them their due credit," Annie happily announced. Then she leaned forward a bit and lowered her voice: "You are the famous Three Investigators, aren't you?"

Pete and Bob nodded at once. Only Jupiter was not sure what to make of this and was looking for the right words: "The way you say that, ma'am, it almost sounds like we're heroes or something."

Clucking, Annie waved away. It looked as if she was trying to fan the three of them. "Oh, you can't fool me, boys! I've been following every article about you in *Rocky Beach Today*. You should be proud! Without you, a lot of people here wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

Free drinks for being famous, Pete thought. This was going to be a great day!

Shortly afterwards, three Cocoa Specials were placed in front of them.

"To another successful case!" the First Investigator announced in a good mood and held up his glass. Pete and Bob joined in and raised their glasses as well.

"Now shall we get on to the main agenda?" Bob suggested.

Jupiter's belly agreed with a deep rumble. "You're right, Bob."

The First Investigator looked at the menu on the table, but his two friends did not make an attempt to reach for it and yet it would have been rude to just take it. Jupiter sighed. "You order first, I can wait..."

To the First Investigator's delight, Bob refused. "Thanks, Juve, but I already know what I'm gonna have—a Double Chisum with extra everything."

"And for me, it's the Classic Ringo with ketchup and cheddar cheese, and vanilla ice cream for dessert," Pete said.

Jupiter immediately grabbed the menu. "I'm afraid I'm going to have a harder choice." Pete could not wipe off a smile.

Very soon, The Three Investigators were enjoying their meal. After that, they ordered another round of Cocoa Specials and a huge snack plate.

Just as they finished, Jupe's mobile phone rang and he looked at the display. "Now, who's this?" He pressed the answer button and held the mobile phone to his ear. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Jupiter Jones? Yes," the caller said. "I'm Sebastian Dawson... If you remember, I bought the Novalux projector from you a few days ago..."

"Yes, I remember that very well, Mr Dawson," Jupe replied.

"Oh, yeah," Dawson continued. "Actually, I contacted Mrs Sullivan earlier today and she gave me your phone number. It's like this... I tested the projector and it was working well—no problems about that... However, when I cleaned it, I happened to discover a lower compartment and there was a reel of film hidden there. I asked Mrs Sullivan whether that belonged to her, but she did not know anything about it. Instead, she told me that you were investigators and I could contact you to see if you are interested."

"Yes, we are investigators, indeed..." Jupe said, "but what is so unusual about the film?"

"Well, I put it on the projector and played it," Dawson said. "There is something strange about it—something somewhat eerie. I think you have to see it for yourself and decide whether you want to take up the case."

"Oh, okay," Jupe said, "if you could give me your contact details, I'll discuss with my colleagues and get back to you very soon." Jupe got out a pen and wrote something on a clean paper napkin, and then he ended the call.

Jupe quickly briefed his two friends about what the phone call was about. The three of them agreed to look into this case, and Jupe called Mr Dawson back to arrange for a meeting.

"All right," Jupe announced after that. "Let's go, fellas!"